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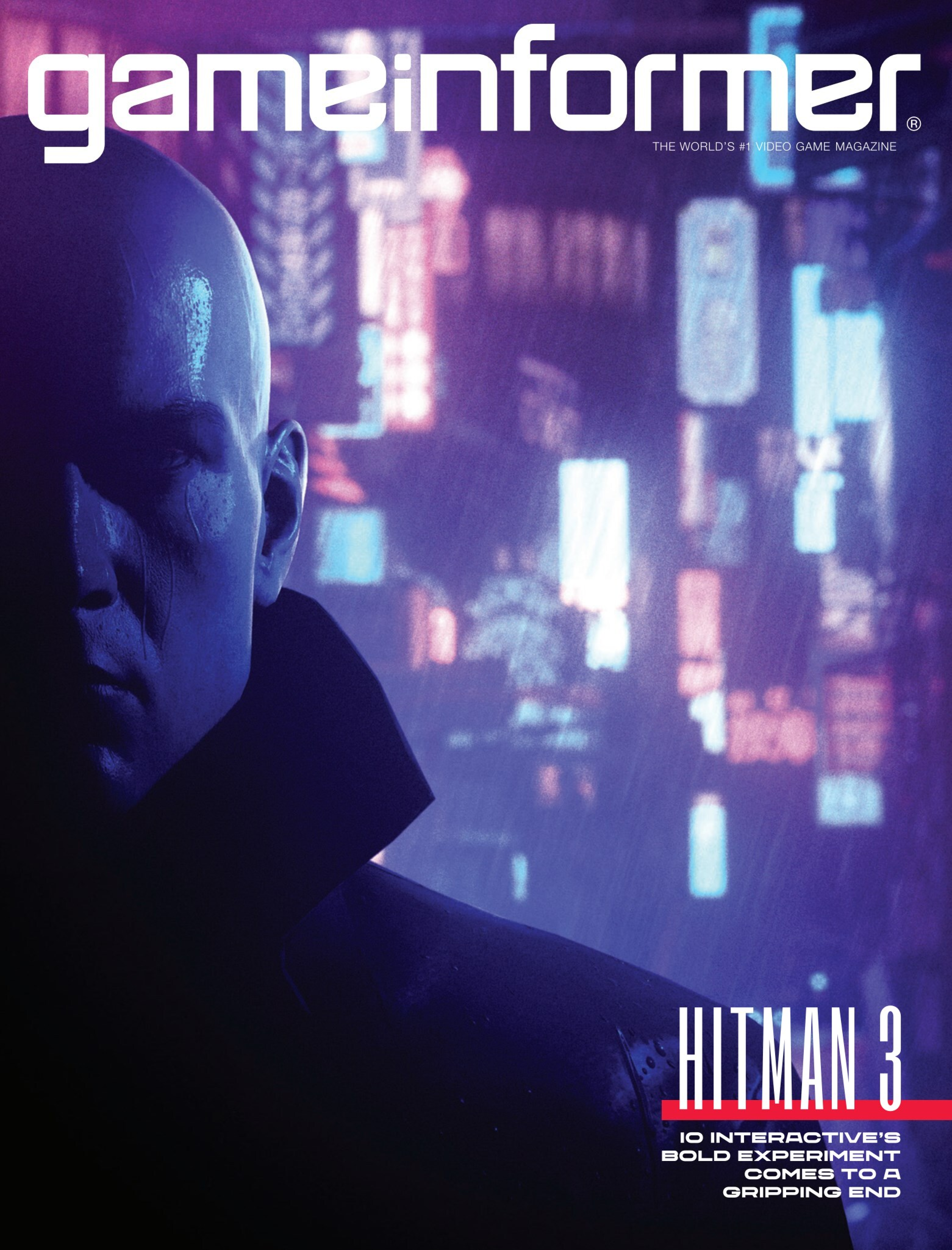

HITMAN 3

IO INTERACTIVE'S BOLD EXPERIMENT COMES TO A GRIPPING END

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The Year That Was And Wasn't

We've all been affected by the pandemic, and our lives have been upended by it. Through all of the uncertainty we faced this year, video games have been a constant ray of light, delivering entertainment and escapism when we needed it most.

We entered new worlds and took our first steps into the future with PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S. As parts of our lives disappeared or were put on hold, gaming got better and proved to be a great excuse to stay at home. To all of the game developers and publishers that delivered new games this year, thank you! Your efforts touched the lives of millions upon millions of gamers, and will not be forgotten. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!

To those game developers and all of you out there who are looking for new adventures to undertake, the issue you hold in your hands is a celebration of 2020's year in gaming. For as long as I can remember, *Game Informer* always rounded up 50 of the year's best games chronologically. This year, we're doing something different. We're narrowing our scope to the 10 best games of the year and are ranking them from 10 to 1. I love lists like this, and love analyzing, celebrating, and bickering about them as much as many of you. In the pages that follow, we deliver more awards and editor picks outside of the 10 that will give you more great games to considering playing.

This will undoubtedly be a year we want to forget, but video games didn't skip a beat and continue to dazzle us in amazing ways. It's a year worth celebrating for video games and for the game developers who made them for us.

As always, be safe. Be happy. And game on!

26 **Hitman 3**

The World of Assassination trilogy comes full circle in IO Interactive's thrilling finale. We dive deep into Agent 47's latest adventure, and learn how the developer's unusual approach to rolling out these games is now paying dividends, uniting content from all the games into a cohesive and complete package. ***by Jeff Cork***

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2020 was an unprecedented year in gaming and around the world. Look back at the ups and downs that shaped our favorite hobby over the last 12 months.

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After finding success with years of Resident Evil movies, the director turns his eyes to another Capcom hit.

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One of the most intriguing new-gen releases is leveraging emerging technology in fascinating ways.

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While many of us were locked in at home, board and card games offered a chance to connect with family and friends. Check out some of the top releases of the year.

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Features editor Kimberley Wallace examines why the arrival of women athletes in sports games can mean so much.

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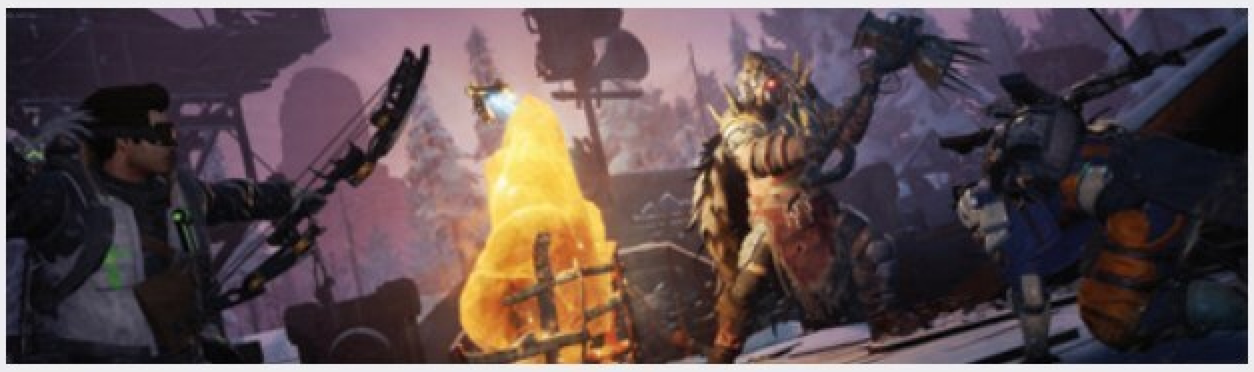
A moving love story melds together with fascinating gameplay to make this one of the most unusual and enchanting games on the horizon.



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Midwinter Entertainment hopes to capture a piece of the online action pie with this free-to-play mix of survival, teamwork, and deadly showdowns.

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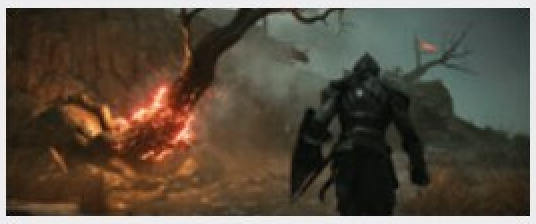
Bungie's shared world shooter reaches an important turning point in the latest expansion, stripping away much of the old content to make way for the years of storytelling that lie ahead.



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The classic game gets a new lease on life with this new-gen PS5 revival. Learn why taking the punishment might be worth it in our full review.

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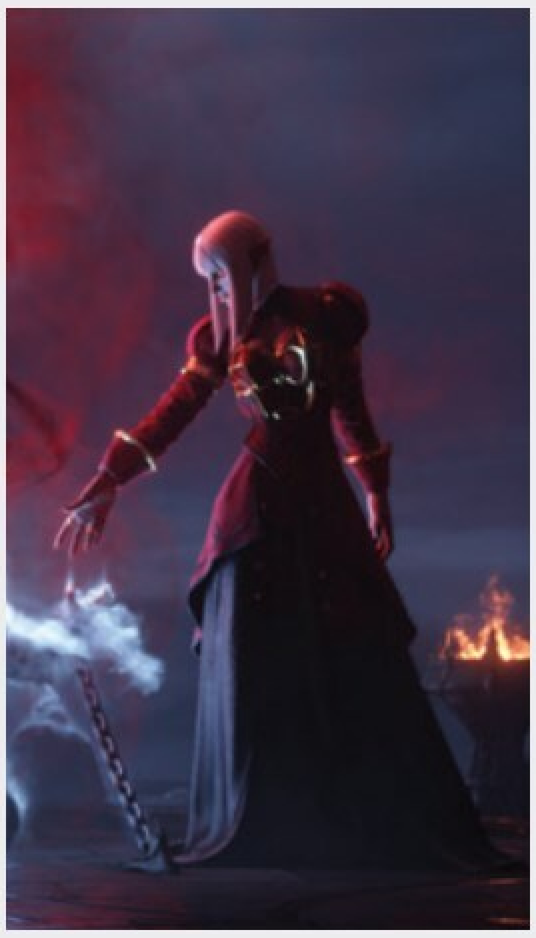
Travel back to the 1980s for a conspiracy-laden campaign, or hop into multiplayer to get your fix. The new installment has a little something for everyone.



79 **World Of Warcraft: Shadowlands**
Blizzard's long-running MMO once again reinvents itself to keep players coming back in the eighth expansion for the celebrated game.

78 **Immortals Fenyx Rising**
The team behind Assassin's Creed Odyssey delivers another open-world tale of Ancient Greece, this time steeped in mythology, humor, and discovery.

80 **Cyberpunk 2077**
After years of waiting, CD Projekt Red's highly anticipated action/RPG hybrid is finally here.

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COMING SOON

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PS5
BUGSNAX
RP
fangamer

PS4
NINTENDO SWITCH
CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER
Nintendo Switch Edition
TEEN
T

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PS4
NINTENDO SWITCH
OFFROAD RACING
BUGGY X ATV X MOTO
EVERYONE
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MICROIDS

PS4
NINTENDO SWITCH
ZENGEON
TEEN
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MATURE 17+
M
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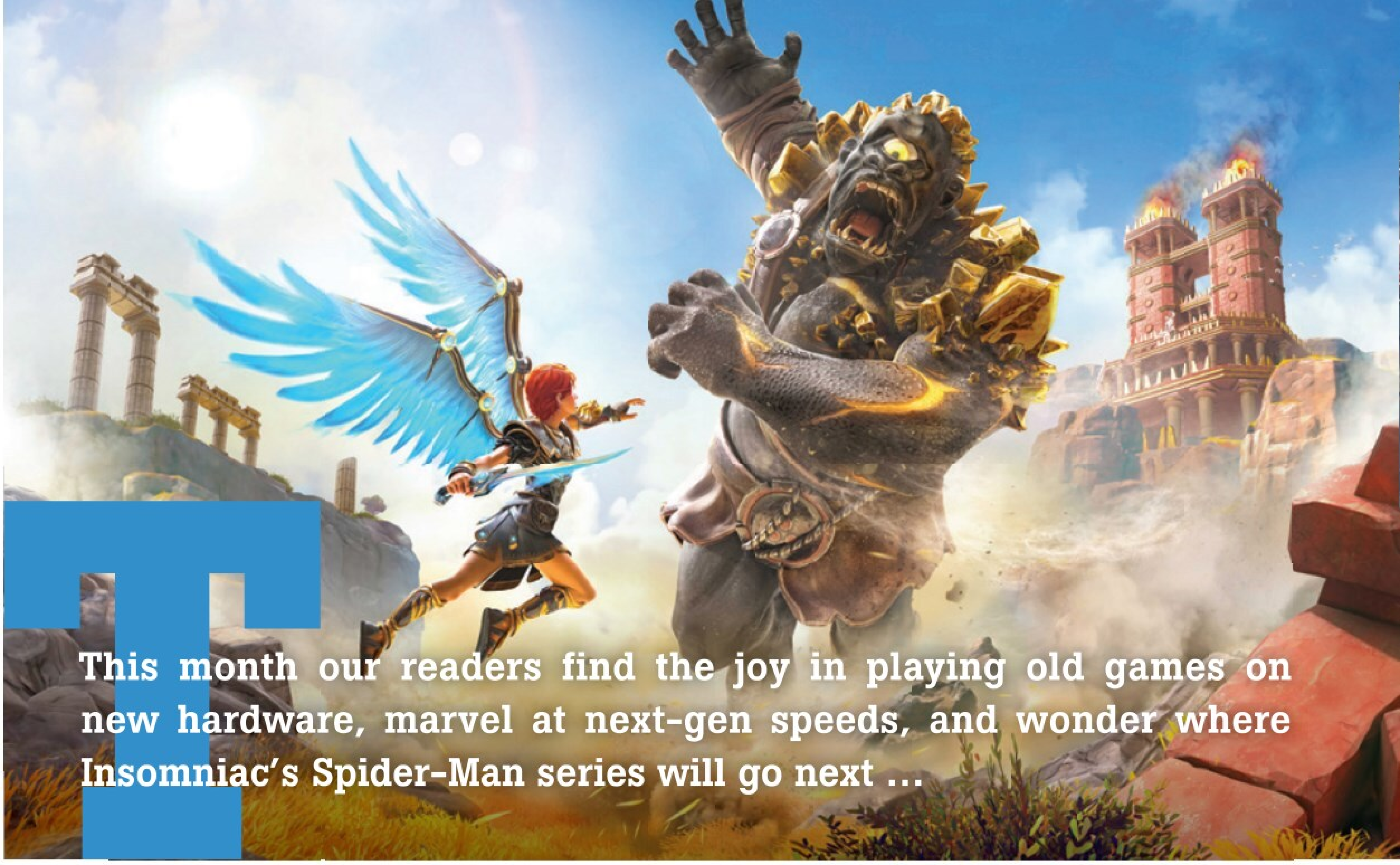


This month our readers find the joy in playing old games on new hardware, marvel at next-gen speeds, and wonder where Insomniac's Spider-Man series will go next …

Immortals Fenyx Rising

I legitimately knew nothing about Immortals Fenyx Rising before seeing it on your cover. When I read the story, I was blown away to realize it was coming out next month! Why did Ubisoft not hype this game up more? It sounds absolutely incredible! A new game from the Assassin's Creed Odyssey team, and it fell through the cracks until your cover. How does that happen?

Jonah
via email

Many Ubisoft open-world games all feel the same in my opinion. Immortals looks like it has a lot of Assassin's Creed DNA in it, but I'm intrigued by the inspiration taken from The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. We need more open-world adventures that let the player chart their own course and make up their own mind about how things should be tackled. I'm glad we have another one of those games in Immortals.

Gianluigi Buffon
via email

Immortals Fenyx Rising's use of narration seems like something we haven't seen before. I'm curious to see how Zeus and Prometheus having a fluid conversation as you play pans out over the long haul. That could be a game-changer. I loved Bastion and Children of Morta's narrator, but never thought about adding a second voice to make conversations. It may play out like a mythological podcast! I can't wait to check it out. Thanks for the great cover story, Brian Shea!

Kyle Pishel
via email

Immortals Fenyx Rising was worth hyping up, and it succeeds in the ways many of you hoped. You can read our full review on page 78. The game may have gotten lost in the shuffle due to the intense focus on the launch of PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S. Ubisoft also launched Assassin's Creed Valhalla and Watch Dogs: Legion right on top of Immortals Fenyx Rising – two high-profile games with bigger marketing pushes. But now, with the success of Immortals Fenyx Rising, we're hoping it finds an audience despite the relatively low levels of pre-release hype.

The Biggest Jump in Generations

When I booted up my Xbox Series X for the first time, I thought I got ripped off. The UI is exactly the same as Xbox One's. My tune changed quickly when I started playing games and using Quick Resume to bounce between them. *Game Informer* wasn't kidding when it said load times would be a thing of the past. Not having to wait to play my game is huge. Not since moving from Super Nintendo to PlayStation have I been so impressed by a new generation of games. Well done, Microsoft! The Series X truly feels like a futuristic piece of tech.

Sidney Yellen
Charleston, SC

Quality-of-life improvements are noticeable on day one, but like all new gaming generations, we haven't seen what these machines are truly capable of yet. Just wait until developers stop making games work for both generations and just focus on the power of the new machines.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Where Are The Shooters?

What do you think happened to movement shooters? The industry has gotten pretty comfortable with its battle royales and tactical shooters. Why would the industry just all of the sudden stop making Quakes and Titanfalls?

Eli Medina
North Carolina

Doom falls into the category of movement shooters and is still being made, but you are totally right: We're seeing more battle royale games and free-to-play multiplayer experiences than story-driven FPS experiences. Rather than Titanfall 3, Respawn made Apex Legends, which is set in the Titanfall universe.

Spider-Man 2

The ending of Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales paints a fascinating picture for what will come in the sequel, and I'm wondering if you think we'll see more Marvel heroes in the spotlight. Gwen Stacy as Spider-Gwen makes sense for a third game, but I would like to see someone like Captain America or Iron Man to move away from another web-swinging character. Do you think Insomniac could pull that off?

Jamie Oliveira
San Francisco, CA

The odds of Spider-Gwen appearing are high, but so are the chances of other non-Spiderverse characters showing up. Remember, Avengers Tower, Fogwell's Gym (Daredevil), the Wakandan Embassy (Black Panther), Alias Investigations (Jessica Jones), and the Sanctum Sanctorum (Dr. Strange) are all in Marvel's Spider-Man. If Insomniac wanted to expand its universe, we're guessing some kind of licensing deal could be struck. We would love to see that happen, and an even bigger dream is for Insomniac to have one team working on Spider-Man sequels and another making a tie-in game for a different hero like your proposed ideas of Captain America or Iron Man.

Old Games Are New Again

I played Days Gone on my PlayStation 4 Pro last year and loved the game. I'm now going through it again on my PlayStation 5, and it feels like a dramatically better version of the game, even though it just runs smoother and looks a little better. That slight boost in performance can really help redefine a game.

Liddy Wellington
Silver City, NM

Seeing old games running at 60 frames-per-second and in a dynamic 4K resolution has been a real treat. Like the previous generation of games, don't be surprised if developers go back and further update their back catalogues for the new generation of gaming. For PS5 owners, the PlayStation Plus Collection of games (which comes with the PlayStation Plus subscription) is a great stroll down memory lane that gives you an idea of what PS5 can do for PS4 games.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

If you were to receive any random or uncanny ability from a video game, what would it be?

The power to load up a save from earlier in life when we said the wrong thing, ate something that wasn't fully cooked, or accidentally passed gas in third grade and are forever reminded of it.

If you could only play one game on Switch, PS4, or Xbox One for the rest of your days, what would it be? Please give me one for each system.

We'd go with games that have endless value and can be played in different ways. Stardew Valley on Switch, Call of Duty: Warzone on PS4, and Overwatch on Xbox One.

Does the disc-less PlayStation 5 actually exist? I've only seen the one with a disc drive at retail.

It does exist. From what we could tell from the system's launch, Sony released fewer of the disc-free system. We'll see if those numbers maintain over time.

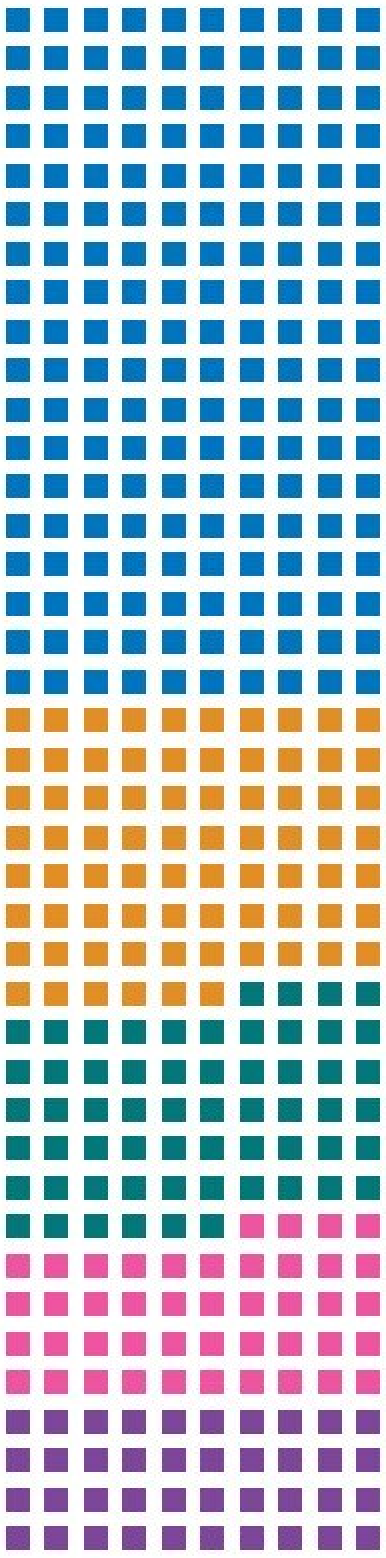
Best Comment:

"I am Groot." (translation: "WHY DOES IT SAY I CAN BUY A PLAYSTATION 5 BUT IT DOESN'T STAY IN MY CART?! EAT SPACE MAGGOTS, WALMART!"

Question Of The Month:

What living game do you go back to the most?

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Find the purchasing of PS5 and Xbox Series X/S to be maddening
- 🟧 Successfully purchased new systems
- 🟩 Gave up on purchasing new systems
- 🟥 Love their new hardware
- 🟪 Are satisfied with Switch

Confusion About Xbox One And Series X

Could you please come up with a list of games that only work on the Xbox Series X? Sony has done a great job of clearly marking which games are for PS4 and which games are for PS5. With Xbox, I can't tell. Are the game boxes labeled "Xbox" Series X exclusives? Are the boxes labeled "Xbox One" playable for both the Xbox One and Series X? How can I tell which Xbox games only work on the Series X? Will game discs, regardless of what it says on the game box, work on both consoles? Help a guy out here!

Lee DeWald
via email

Almost every Xbox One game works on Xbox Series X/S (both disc and digital versions). Games designed exclusively for Kinect are the only ones that won't run on the new hardware. On the other side of the spectrum, some future releases for Xbox Series X/S may not run on Xbox One (Bloober Team's horror game The Medium appears to be one of those titles). But right now, most Xbox games work on both generations of hardware.

Open-World Games

I'd like to talk about open-world games and player choice. I'm playing through Assassin's Creed Valhalla right now and enjoying it well enough (it's no Odyssey, though). But now that I am playing my fifth or sixth Assassin's Creed game, not to mention all the time sunk into the The Witcher 3, Final Fantasy XV, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, and Horizon Zero Dawn, the charm of amazing sights, new vistas, and just wandering around is fading. Especially as I get older and my time becomes more valuable, time spent on fetch quests or just tromping through a forest to get to the next quest seems like a real drag. The novelty of player choice is also waning. Frankly, the best video game story moments come from more linear games that were very purposefully written. I would rather have one excellent story than three mediocre ones. I enjoy getting as much bang for my buck as possible, but I can't help but feel like I want these 60-100 hour experiences distilled down into a denser experience. You editors must play more games than me – are you getting tired of these in-between moments or do you enjoy every little bit of content?

Mike
Boulder, CO

The quality of time invested in a world is different in each game. Some side content (like in The Witcher 3) is every bit as meaningful and fun as the main storyline. However, tracking down floating papers (like in Assassin's Creed Valhalla) in a game seems like odd busywork. The hope is developers are trying to create engaging content and that they aren't wasting the player's time. On the other hand, some games are designed with extensive grinding in mind, and while that may not be for everyone, a good number of players love that – if the reward is worth the effort. It all comes down to whether you find the content rewarding. It sounds like your taste has changed, and that's okay. It happens to all of us as we experience a broader range of games.

Collectibles

Last month we asked our readers what kinds of video game collectibles they are into. Here's what they had to say …

I have over 50 video game statues. I get roughly two of them a year and have been collecting them for over 20 years. I keep them in glass cases and on my fireplace mantel. The prize of my collection is Blizzard's D.Va statue. I also love my First4Figures' Soul Calibur Nightmare statue.

Neil Debnath
Bangor, ME

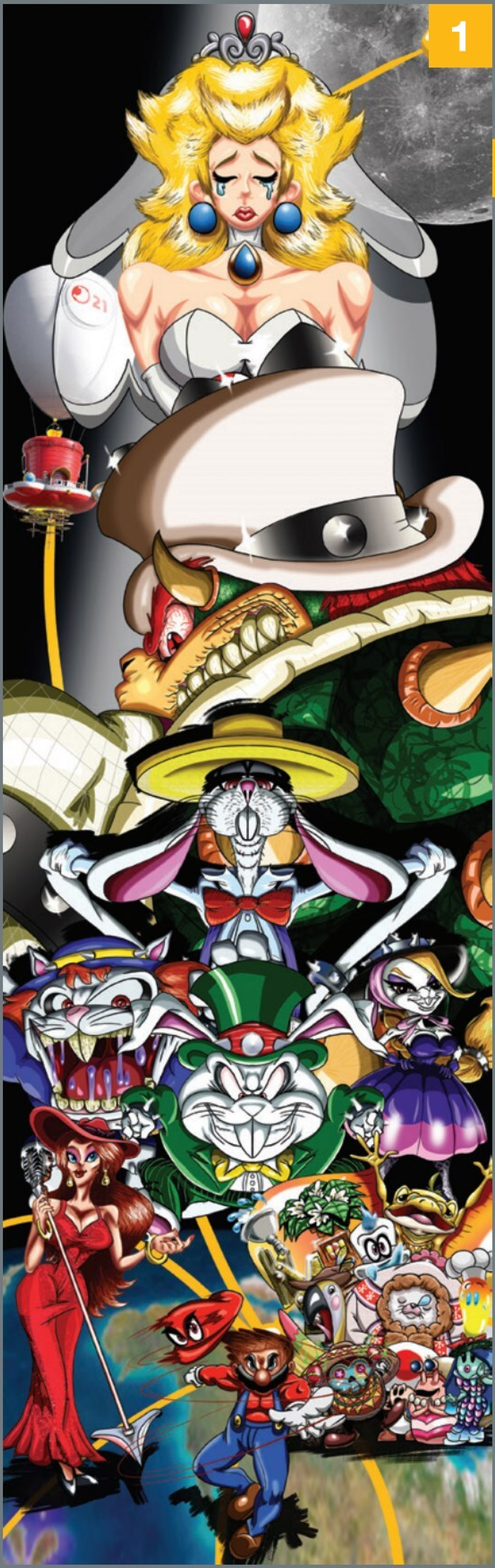
An entire wall in my room is made up of Funko Pop figures. I nailed little platforms on my wall for each of them to stand on. The wall has 185 different figures on it. My husband and I agree that they cannot go anywhere else in the house. The wall is in our TV room and fits the vibe. If I get a new Funko figure, an old one has to go. I have all of the Overwatch ones. They will never be removed.

Carly "Fun Funko Lover" Jackson
Springdale, AR

I have the strangest video game collection of all. My nine-year-old son sculpts figures out of Play-Doh. We then bake them to make them solid. We have all of them on a shelf in our study. We also have made a few of them into Christmas ornaments. He's so talented!

Kshama S.
via email

gallery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WINNER

1 Niko Porter

A lot of brides cry on their wedding day, but Peach is sad that she wasn't abandoned at the altar.

2 Elizabth Kelly

No one sees the Ghost coming for them ... Oh, there he is. Probably shouldn't wear such a garish hat.

3 Brandon Beckerdite

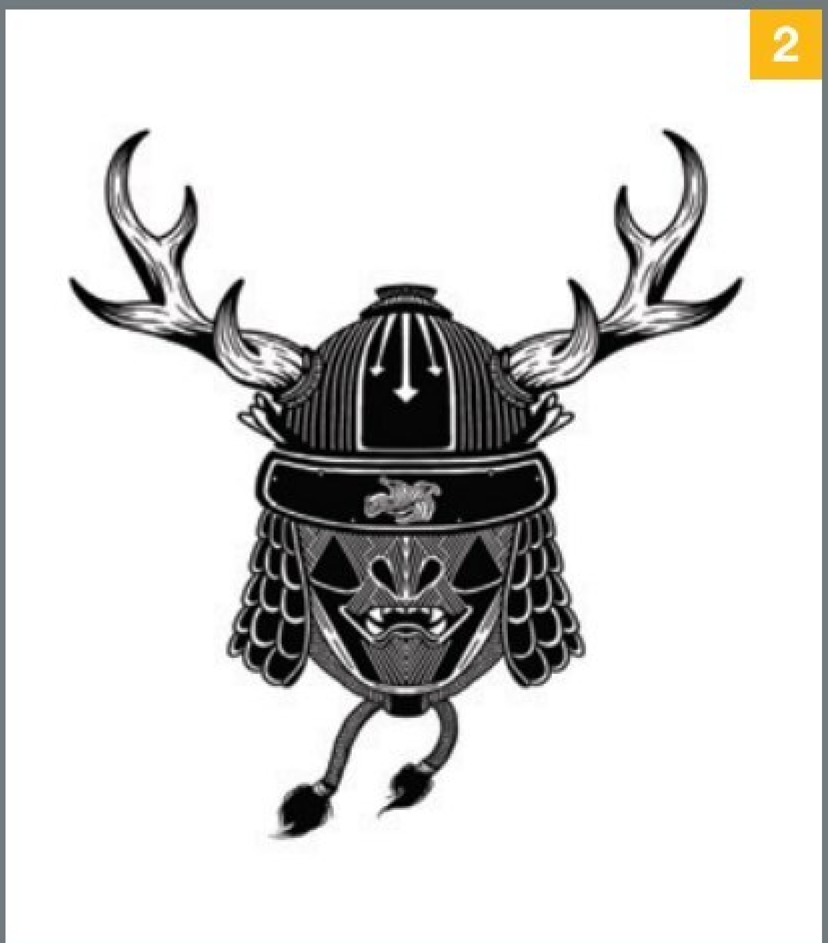
If you look at this sideways, you can see Link is standing on a ladder.

4 Anna Freligh

Welcome to Yoshi's Lucky Adventure Park. Sorry, the door locks behind you.

5 Jessica Osborne

Handsome Jack is about to do to you what Michael Bay does to audiences with every film.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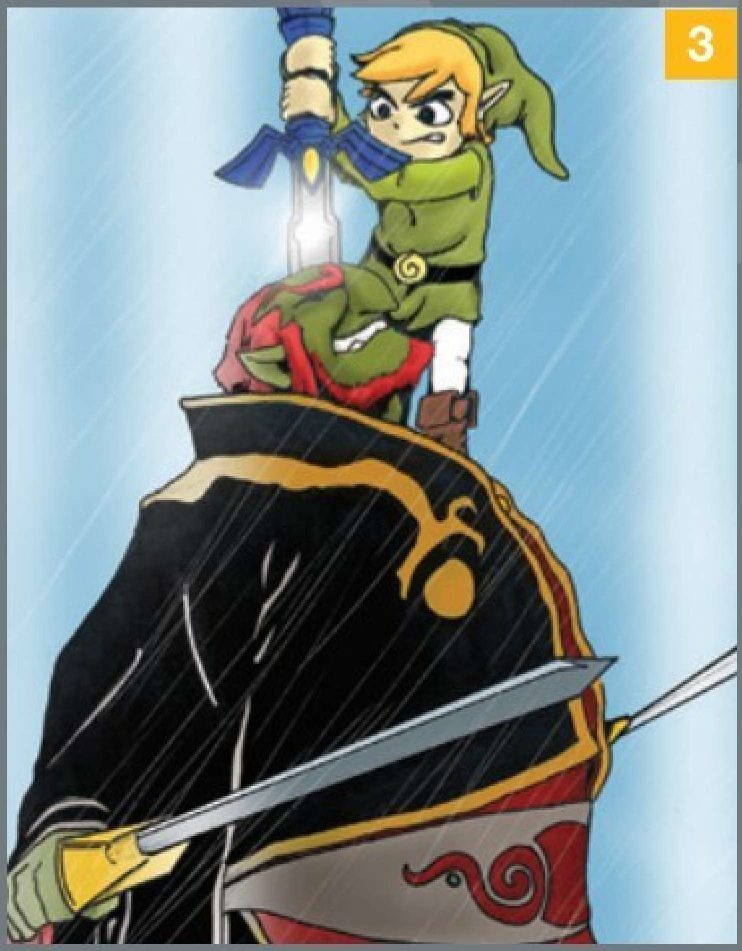
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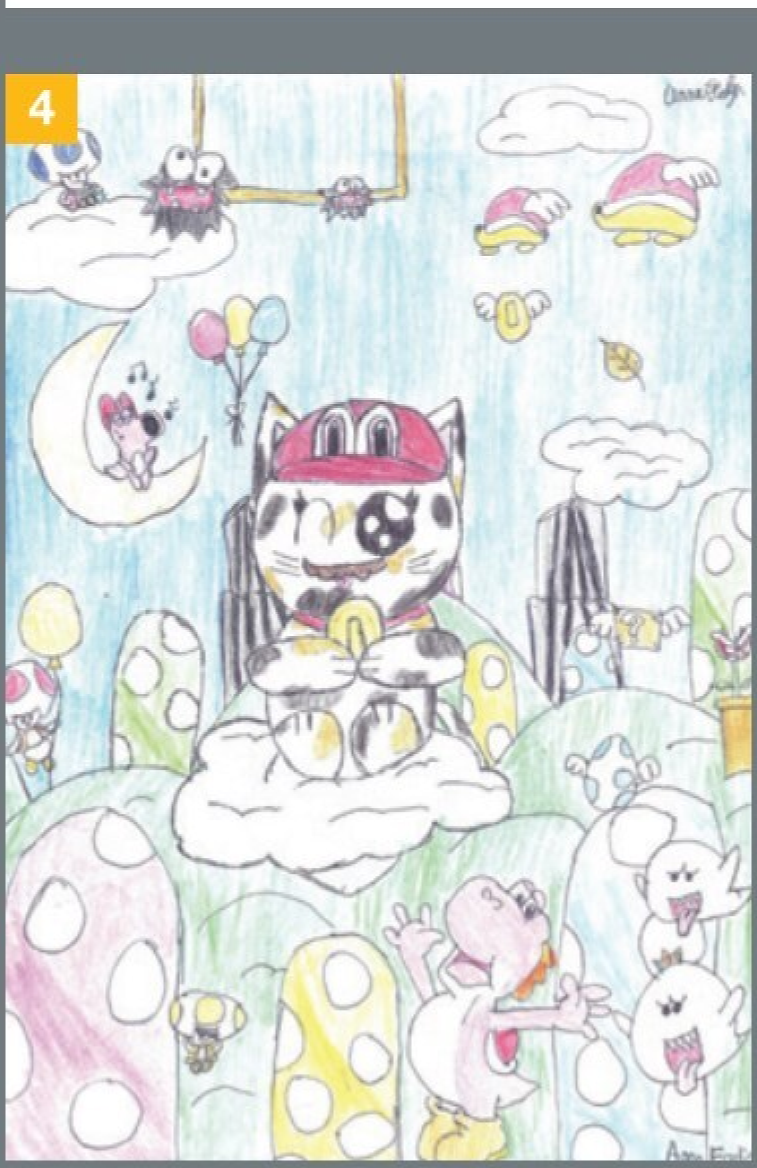
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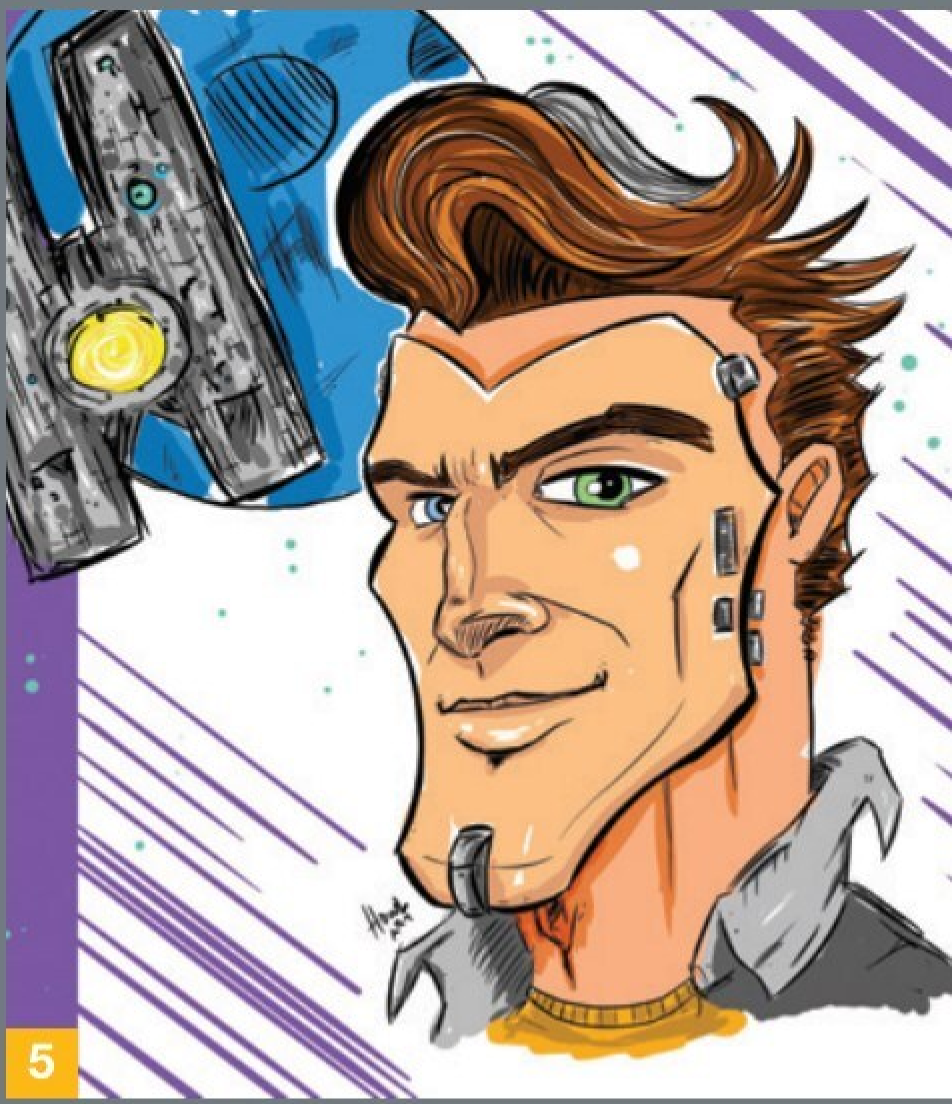
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Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media. Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

connect

LOOKING BACK AT 2020

by Blake Hester

To say 2020 has been a challenging year would be an understatement. Between the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, a presidential election, and a time of civil unrest, sometimes just getting out of bed in the morning can seem like a sisyphean task.

Nothing in our day-to-day lives has been untouched by the state of our current world, especially when it comes to COVID-19. This is, of course, true of the video game industry as well, which has had to adapt to new work-from-home measures, new production pipelines, and the new ways players are consuming and buying video games. This year also saw the launch of a new console generation and a long-overdue reckoning about abuse within the industry.

As 2020 winds to a close, we're taking the chance to look back at the year that was, running down some of the game industry's biggest moments, and reflecting on an unprecedented time for the world and our small slice of it. It all starts with the virus that changed our way of life seemingly overnight.

THE COVID-19 CRISIS

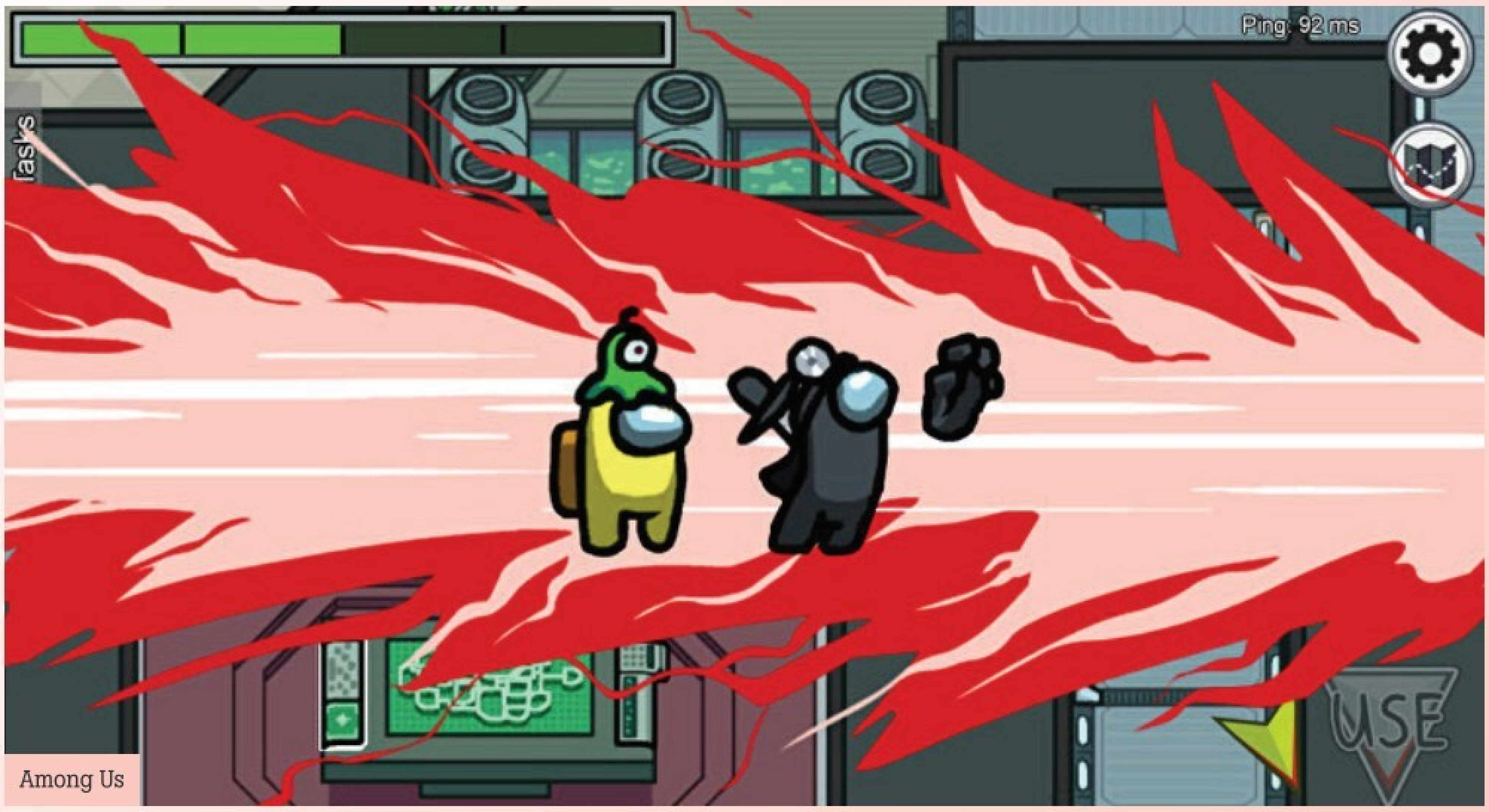
According to the CDC, the first reported case of COVID-19 was on December 31, 2019, in Wuhan, China. In the United States, the virus was first diagnosed in Washington state on January 20, 2020. The first known death in the U.S., as reported by *The New York Times*, was sometime between early and mid February. As of this writing, more than 1.3 million people have died from the virus worldwide.

In almost every way, this has set the scene for 2020. Industries around the world have been affected by COVID-19, and so, too, has the game industry. On the one hand, for developers and publishers, lockdown and stay-at-home orders have led to dramatic increases in sales and engagement. As of September, Nintendo reported that Animal Crossing: New Horizons (pictured, opposite), often pointed to as the game to play in lockdown, had sold more than 26 million copies. Additionally, per *The Washington Post*, Microsoft has said it had a 130-percent increase in multiplayer engagement between March and April. Recent estimates by the game industry analyst firm NewZoo have the game industry growing nearly 20-percent over 2019, making $174.9 billion total in 2020.

Lockdowns also affected the video game zeitgeist in new and unique ways. Most notably, multiplayer-focused games took off and captured the collective consciousness, bringing people together in an otherwise isolating time. One of the biggest was Among Us, a game that originally released to little attention in 2018 only to explode in popularity this year after numerous streamers and YouTubers began playing the game in front of their audiences. When it first came out, Among Us was getting only 30 to 50 concurrent players at a time. At the time of this writing, that figure is around 100,000.

On the other hand, development pipelines, especially for triple-A developers, have been altered dramatically as health advisors around the world warn against large public gatherings, making offices a no-go. We reported on the way this has affected EA Sports' various games in our last issue, highlighting how the teams have adapted to working from home. Additionally, games like Deathloop, Halo Infinite, and No More Heroes III were delayed partly due to COVID-related complications. E3, GDC, Tokyo Game Show, and virtually every other in-person event after mid-March was also canceled this year, though some shifted to online alternatives.

Waking up in the morning means contending with the ways the current pandemic is changing our everyday life, even down to how we engage with our media. But it wasn't the only thing that affected the game industry this year.



Among Us

Assassin's Creed Valhalla

RECKONING

One in four. That's the amount of people at Ubisoft that say they have witnessed or experienced some kind of workplace misconduct over the past two years, according to an anonymous survey of around 14,000 employees at its studios around the world, as reported by *The Verge*. Additionally, per the report, one in five people said they didn't feel they were "fully respected or safe in the work environment." Employees that were women and non-binary were more likely to face workplace harassment than men, the survey also said. According to a report by *Bloomberg*, these issues have been happening at the company for more than a decade.

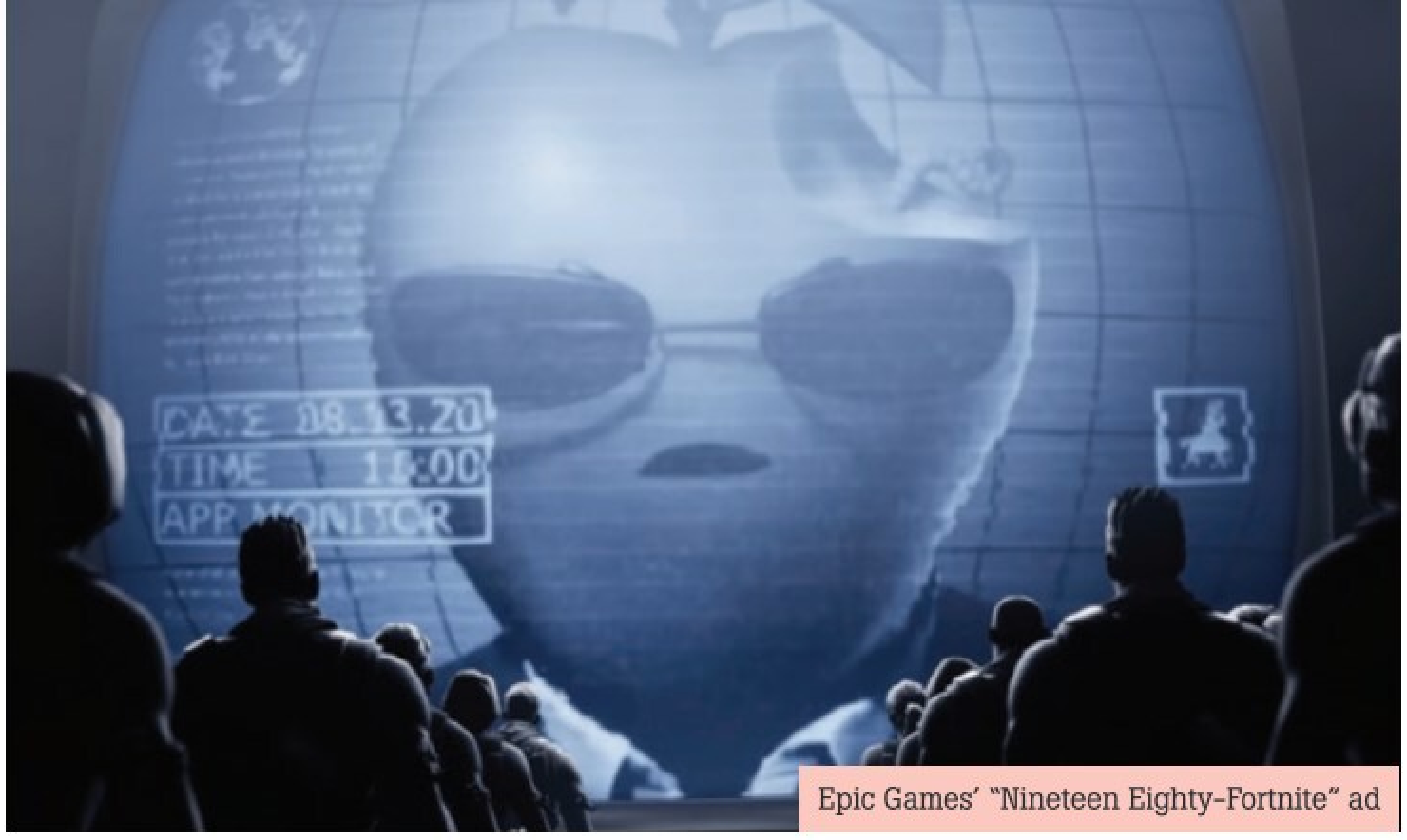
In the summer of 2020, the game industry faced a reckoning. Over the course of several weeks, a flood of allegations of sexual harassment, racism, and abuse within the industry were made about a variety of companies and people therein.

Ubisoft stands as one of the most prominent and severe examples. In the wake of these allegations, Ubisoft fired top executives, such as its chief creative officer Serge Hascoët, as well as Tommy François, Ubisoft's former VP of editorial and creative services. Following his departure from Ubisoft in September, Michel Ancel, creator of the Rayman and Beyond Good and Evil series, was accused of running an abusive workplace, though he denies the allegations. Outside of Ubisoft, Chris Avellone, writer of games such as Fallout 2 and 2017's Prey, was also removed from Dying Light 2 by developer Techland following allegations.

This is effectively the game industry's #MeToo moment, a cultural movement that began in the wake of abusers being outed within the film industry. While allegations have come out in the past about people working in and around games, the sheer amount of people coming forward with their own stories this summer put a magnifying glass on how truly widespread abuse is in the game industry.

However, it remains to be seen if the industry will work to better itself and create systems to ensure this won't continue – something it hasn't been great about in the past. In 2020, these allegations were impossible to ignore. While numerous companies have cut ties with people accused of abuse, and companies such as Ubisoft have pledged to "do better," time will tell how or if they make good on these promises. On the one hand, history has shown the game industry has a bad track record of removing accused individuals from even things such as professional industry events. On the other hand, based on sheer numbers alone, this isn't something it can sweep under the rug.

Beyond Good and Evil 2



Epic Games' "Nineteen Eighty-Fortnite" ad

MONEY

There's a lot of money in the game industry, and in 2020 plenty of it exchanged hands and was fought over.

First up, Epic Games and Apple had a very public fight over Fortnite on the iOS App Store. The feud started when reports began to surface in August that Epic was allowing the option to bypass Apple's 30-percent cut and make in-game purchases directly from Epic. The billion-dollar company, Epic, went so far as to rally its fans against the trillion-dollar company, Apple, with with a 1984-inspired video (reminiscent of Apple's own 1984 commercial introducing the Macintosh computer) and the hashtag #freefortnite. Apple responded by removing Fortnite from the App Store, claiming Epic broke contract by implementing its own programs. A trial date for the ongoing lawsuit is set for May 3, 2021.

Meanwhile, Microsoft continued its recent developer-purchasing spending spree, this time dropping a staggering $7.5 billion for Bethesda and parent company ZeniMax Media in September. While the transaction won't be finalized until the second half of fiscal year 2021, the ramifications of this purchase could be profound. Bethesda is the developer and publisher of some of the biggest game IP in history, including, but not limited to, The Elder Scrolls and Fallout. Now under Microsoft's ownership, should the company choose to, all of Bethesda's biggest titles could be Xbox exclusives, coming to its ever-growing Game Pass subscription service, which recently surpassed 15 million subscribers.

A NEW GENERATION

Lastly, this year marked the launch of a new generation of consoles. Good luck getting your hands on one, though.

While Microsoft officially unveiled its new console, the Xbox Series X, at The Game Awards in 2019, we didn't know exactly what Sony had up its sleeve until June 2020, when it officially debuted the PlayStation 5.

Sony and Microsoft took markedly different approaches to their new consoles. While Sony has stuck to its normal route of adding new tech to its hardware, Microsoft has gone for a more iterative approach. Where Sony is focusing on its future of first party titles and how the console's tech will embrace those games on PlayStation 5, Microsoft's focus is on nurturing an ecosystem of Xbox games and making them easy to access – most notably through its stellar backwards compatibility and Game Pass.

Both the PS5 and Series X do bring consoles closer to the power of modern PCs, however. Out of the box, both machines can run games at 4K resolution and above and with higher frame-rates. They also boast much faster loading speeds, able to stream data at a rate impossible on last gen's machines, effectively ending the long-standing era of the load screen.

But whether or not you need a new console is a different conversation. While the PS5 launched with two games you can only play on that machine (the Demon's Souls remake and Astro's Playroom, a pack-in game), the Series X has no games that can't also be played on the Xbox One or other platforms. This effectively leaves both consoles without the standard "killer app" of previous generations, with upgrading to new machines more a choice of convenience and desire more than necessity.

Even if you wanted to upgrade to a new console, there's a good chance you couldn't. Since both machines went up for pre-order, they've been extremely hard to buy, selling out almost as soon as they're posted. This issue has persisted since both were released in mid-November, leaving lots of people forced to stick with last generation. Sony and Microsoft have both said they are working to remedy this issue in 2021.

LOOKING AHEAD

What the next 12 months will bring is anyone's guess, but 2020 was an unprecedented year for the game industry and the world. As we enter 2021, it'll be interesting to see how a lot of the biggest stories from this year continue to evolve as time goes on. ◆

Astro's Playroom

Other Notable Moments From 2020

- Travis Scott Performs For More Than 10 Million In Fortnite
- Dr. Disrespect Permanently Banned From Twitch
- The Last Of Us Part II's Story Gets Leaked, Review Bombed
- Microsoft Shuts Down Mixer, Merges With Facebook Streaming
- Amazon Launches Crucible Only To Cancel It Months Later

Inside The Belly Of The Beast

How Paul W.S. Anderson brought Monster Hunter to the big screen

If you think about video game movies, there's a good chance Paul W.S. Anderson's work quickly comes to mind. As the director and/or producer on all six Resident Evil movies, he's not only made the most successful video game movies of all time, he's also made a name for himself doing so. He's not done with Capcom games, though. Anderson is taking on Monster Hunter, and went to the ends of the Earth, quite literally, to make his next epic. We caught up with the director to learn about how he got Capcom on board, the harsh environments of shooting in Namibia, and the sunburnt eyeballs along the way.

by Blake Hester

When Anderson talks about Monster Hunter, there's a palpable excitement in his voice; he often uses words like "wonder" and "amazement" to describe the games. These two feelings are something he brings up as something he's trying to translate into his movie. On the one hand, this is likely some amount of marketing speak; he's talking to us to promote his next blockbuster after all. On the other hand, it's easy to buy that he really feels this strongly about the movie and series, too. When he gets going, he doesn't really stop, talking about why he loves Monster Hunter and what it's been like adapting it for the big screen. He packs a lot of info into our 30-minute phone call.

Anderson says he first became aware of Monster Hunter 11 years ago, when a friend in Tokyo suggested he check out the games. "At that point, Monster Hunter was very much, as you probably know, kind of a Japanese-only phenomena; it was relatively unknown outside of Japan, but it was a very big deal within Japan," Anderson tells *Game Informer*. "I could immediately see why." He instantly wanted to make a movie, he says.

At the time, Anderson was a few films deep into the *Resident Evil* series, which would go on to be the most successful video game adaptations of all time, bringing in $1.2 billion worldwide. Despite that success, he says Capcom was hesitant about giving him the greenlight for *Monster Hunter*, and from inception to release, it's been over a decade in the making; he began pitching developer/publisher Capcom around 2009. The global success of Monster Hunter: World in 2017, though, finally gave Anderson the approval he was looking for.

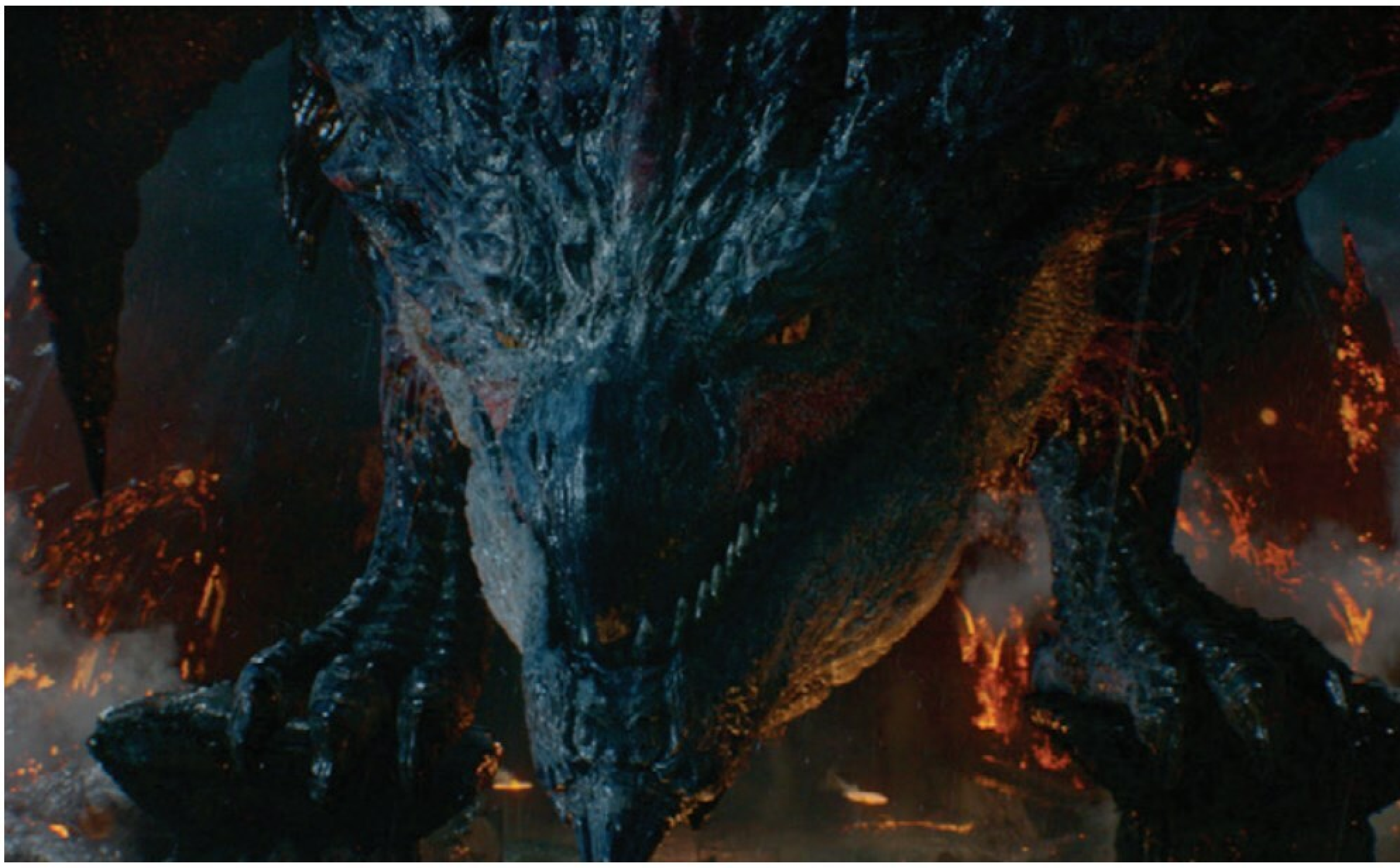
But even compared to *Resident Evil*, Capcom was very hands-on with *Monster Hunter*, Anderson says. Numerous times in our interview, he brings up Kaname Fujioka and Ryozo Tsujimoto, director and producer of the Monster Hunter series at Capcom respectively, as being heavily involved with the process – especially when it came to the movie's monsters. "I would say Fujioka-san and Tsujimoto-san, we were in the driving seat together, sharing the steering wheel," Anderson says. "Or we had three separate steering wheels."

"My feeling was if I can please Fujioka-san and Tsujimoto-san and the level of detail and clarity and specificity that they want, if they're happy, then even the most hardcore fan is going to be happy," he adds.

The monsters in *Monster Hunter* were made using CG, of course; there's no way around that. For the movie's world, however, Anderson wanted to shoot on location instead of a studio backlot. But matching the spectacle of the *Monster Hunter* world proved to be a challenge for him and his team. So they scouted locations around the world: finding dramatic landscapes that closely matched the fantastical landscapes of the game. Most of the film was shot in South Africa, as well as the harsh deserts of Namibia.

Resident Evil Village

The Resident Evil series has been a huge part of *Monster Hunter* director Paul W.S. Anderson's career. So is he excited for Resident Evil Village, the next mainline game in the series? "I think I've been in the *Monster Hunter* world for so long, I don't think I can comment on that," Anderson says, laughing.



As Anderson tells it, the locations the team chose were upwards of 200 miles from the closest civilization. They had to erect tent villages in the middle of the desert for 300 people to live in, pump their own water and run their own electricity. There was the weather to contend with, too. "Nature hadn't intended for mankind to live there," Anderson says. "During the days, we'd have temperatures of, like, 50 degrees centigrade. That's like 120 fahrenheit or something. Like, insane heat. Then during the nighttimes it would drop below freezing."

The result, again, is that feeling of wonder and amazement Anderson says he got from playing the games. He tried to pick locations that could be as true to the game as possible, even if it was perilous. "We literally went to the ends of the Earth," he says.

There's a pretty safe argument to be made that Anderson went above and beyond the call for the movie's environments. That argument could also apply to the movie's monsters. According to him, creating the CG monsters in *Monster Hunter* took a year and a half – by design. Anderson says he didn't want the animators to rush for six months at the end of the project, turning in work that wasn't their best. So he gave them the time to really craft the movie's creatures, and he says it paid off.

"Now that the movie is finished, the combination of these real giant landscapes with creatures locked into reality and creatures that have taken over a year to build and to animate with the input of the creators of those creatures from Capcom, the results are stunning," Anderson says. "I mean, really, this is going to be the best monsters anyone's ever seen, in my opinion."

If Anderson has a recurring motif in his video game movies, it's their primary star, Milla Jovovich. The two first started working together on the first *Resident Evil*, in which she played the movie's protagonist, Alice, a role she played for 15 years across all six films. She's also Anderson's wife. Unsurprisingly, alongside actors like Tip "T.I." Harris, Ron Perlman, and Tony Jaa, Jovovich stars in *Monster Hunter*. Nearly 20 years after they first started working together, Anderson calls her a great creative partner, who, even on a movie full of extremes, was willing to go the extra mile for her part.

"If your lead actor's willing to go to the ends of the Earth to go shoot *Monster Hunter*," Anderson says, "live in a tent in alternating subzero and super hot temperatures, put up with dust storms, put up with getting burnt eyeballs, which she did, the whites of her eyes were sunburnt by the time we got to the end of the movie because she was working so much in the hard desert sun. If your lead actress is willing to go that extra nine yards for the movie, then that helps take everyone else over the top as well."

It's been a long decade for Anderson trying to make a Monster Hunter movie, but it's almost here. *Monster Hunter* releases in theaters on December 18 in the U.S. And only in theaters, which may raise some eyebrows, considering the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. But in Anderson's mind, even if it isn't the most elegant answer, seeing *Monster Hunter* on a big screen is the way to do it.

"I think – listen, there's no predicting the future; you just gotta hope for the best," Anderson says. "You know, it's a really fun movie, I'm incredibly proud of it. I think it's the best movie I've made and I'm excited for people to finally see it, having worked on it for so long. If anything's worth going to see in cinema, it's this, because it was built for the big screen."

A Possible Franchise

The last time director Paul W.S. Anderson tackled a Capcom franchise, it ran for six movies and made more than a billion dollars. With *Monster Hunter*, does he have similar aspirations? According to Anderson, no. He's taking it one movie at a time. "As soon as you spend more time thinking about what the sequels are going to be than the movie you're actually making right now, then you don't put your all into the movie you're doing right now," he says. "You look at any franchise, it's really reliant on one movie after the next. Really, the last two and a half years has been two and a half years of just *Monster Hunter 1*. And if there's a *Monster Hunter 2*, that would be great, I wouldn't say no. But really our effort has been all-in on this movie."

ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

Ubisoft Montreal has many years of experience working on the Assassin's Creed franchise, but the studio isn't known for taking small steps. From reimagining exploration with Black Flag to formalizing the series' RPG status with Origins, we've come to expect more than incremental improvements from this team. That trend continues with Assassin's Creed Valhalla, which brings familiar pillars together in clever ways to surprise new and old fans alike. We talked to producer Julien Laferrière about the big changes, the post-launch priorities, and the decisions that went on behind the scenes during the development of this Viking saga. *by Joe Juba*

What has surprised you most about people's response so far?

I'll start with the part that I hoped people would get. We invested a lot of effort in the settlement, which was a central piece of the game. Even internally, when we were developing it, it was the center of a lot of things. But to validate the fact that it has the weight we were expecting, you kind of have to build the whole game and see it … So I was really looking forward to seeing the reception, and I was really happy just to see people were getting it and enjoying it.

But what surprised me most was this: We introduced world events in this game to compensate for the change in structure with the settlement, and I was really hoping players would get it, but I didn't expect players to dig it so much. Because [the world events] play a lot with the tone – sometimes it's almost a joke. It's funny. Like, there's a character who has an axe in his head. It's silly when you think about it; we would never make a main quest about a guy with an axe stuck in his head! The world events were designed as a valve to let off some steam for quest designers who have a bunch of good ideas – all those little narrative moments that didn't fit into other places in the game.

How did the team land on the idea of using the settlement as a hub?

We knew we would be changing the game structure, which came after a reflection on what we did with Assassin's Creed Origins: "We created all these characters, and some of them are not memorable. Why is that? They look cool, their script is cool, their performances are cool. Why don't they get their hooks in players?" We found that because of the way Origins was built – and Odyssey was the same – you unfog the map progressively, and usually you never go back to a part of the map you've explored. And the characters are tied to those specific areas of the map. So we were like, "What if we added a place which is a sort of anchor, where you could see the consequences of the decisions you've made, and the NPCs you met? For me, it started with trying to have more memorable characters. Obviously, they could always have more impressive clothes and amazing resolution in their faces, but that's not really the issue. The issue is that they need more screen time. They need closure – a beginning and an end – and the settlement was perfect for that."

How do you approach the intro sequence to ensure it hits the sweet spot between introducing the right concepts without dragging on too long?

The beginning of the game is always something we work on until the last minute. In school, they teach you that one way to structure a text is to write the main body, and you save your introduction and conclusion until the end. For me, making the beginning of the game goes back to that; the beginning has to be a proper introduction to the game as it's being built. You iterate along the way, but it was a challenge to introduce players to the systems – and we have a lot of changes in Valhalla. That's why the first thing you do when you leave the boat is collect those berries, right? Because health in this game doesn't regen. Then you reach a high point – that's our way of guiding the players without holding their hands too much, but doing something that fans might be familiar with. But then you jump, and you don't have the leap of faith – to say you're a Viking, not an Assassin. So there are a lot of things going on, and we have a lot of mechanics to cover. We iterated a lot on the beginning … from what I'm reading, some people love it, and some people think it's a bit long. But we feel it's the introduction the game needed.

Valhalla doesn't just let players choose a male or female Eivor – there's a third "let the Animus choose" option that changes Eivor's gender at different points. Who did you have in mind when creating that option?
For me, it's the perfect option for players who are really into the lore and players who will connect to the question: "Who is Eivor, really?" But that being said, we've made sure it doesn't feel random, so it's not like, "Sometimes I'm male, sometimes I'm female." And it's not only for lore-obsessed players; anybody should be able to say, "I'm playing female Eivor in that case, but male in that case – okay, that makes sense." They may not understand the deep-down reasons, but we were aiming for a certain coherency. It's meant a bit like a director's cut – if you want to have the experience the way the creators envisioned it. But if your Eivor is a female badass warrior all the time, that's fine! If you choose the male [option] and are into the beards, that's fine!

Apart from the announced post-launch updates, what is on the top of your priority list?
I think Odyssey was very successful in listening to its player base. When looking at Valhalla's post-launch plans, it was important to me to have quality-of-life fixes in there, and also be able to react to the new platforms, because they continue improving. We've got great reception on PS5, Series X, and PC as well; people are definitely enjoying the high-end capabilities of the game, so we want to continue to capitalize on that. This isn't meant to sound like bulls--- or cliché, but for me, it's about hearing what the player base is saying and reacting to that, on top of the extra content and the features.

Was there any feature from early on that you thought might have been cool to include, but it just didn't make it into the final game?
We had our pillars pretty early, and we stuck to them. We tweaked in terms of balance … but we stayed true to those pillars. But one thing I can say that didn't make it through that we thought might work very early on was naval combat. We actually found out that Vikings were not doing much naval combat; we thought they might be shooting flaming arrows like in Odyssey. But they just didn't do that. So, we said, "There's no sea in our map, only rivers … we're going to treat the ship more like a vehicle."

How did the team make the decision to cover most of the skill tree with fog?
It's funny, because we wanted to have a feeling of discovery in the skill tree. What if you started with all of the nodes unfogged? That's pretty intimidating for players … we have an audience who are not necessarily hardcore RPG players, and we wanted to cater to them and make it a bit easier. And it was also to trigger the feeling of, "I wonder what's under that cloud? What do I get if I go in that direction?" But we also didn't want to make it punishing, which is why you can respec at any time. And you can undo individual selections without respeccing the entire tree. There's a lot of thought that was put into this tree to make it fun to play with, because we wanted a crazy-big skill tree to give you a lot of options.

I was impressed by the variety in Valhalla's side content, especially compared to the series' last couple installments. Was this a specific priority for the team?
I'm happy you asked this question, because from the first presentation we did on the game to top management in Paris, one of the key items we wanted to work on production-wise was variety. We know players engage with these games for many hours, and after 60 hours, we still want to be able to surprise players. That drove the entire production, from the amount of activities to the kinds of minigames to the puzzles. Every single location in the game, we tried to say, "Okay, what's the surprise? Is it a reward, a miniboss, a puzzle? Something that transforms into something else? Is it a lady who wants to collect viper eggs to create the biggest fart ever?" Variety was a key pillar … as part of that first presentation, we said, "We will bet on variety to achieve even better long-term play." So, I'm happy it worked for you. Hopefully it works for other players as well! ◆

The Technology Behind The Medium

by Liana Ruppert

The Medium is an upcoming psychological-horror experience from Bloober Team that pushes the boundaries of reality both narratively and with an expert use of modern technology. With the main character thrust into a reality hovering between worlds, the process behind making an experience like this is more intricate than you might think.

Speaking with lead game designer Wojciech Piejko and producer Jacek Zięba, we dove deep into what makes a game like this work so fluidly when simultaneously bouncing between two realities. We also uncovered that this title was initially planned for development during the Xbox 360 era. With the Xbox Series X boasting extremely powerful hardware, this generation is the perfect fit to bring the vision of The Medium to life.

"The idea of this game is more than a few years old," Piejko says when reflecting back on The Medium's humble beginnings. "We did have a few iterations with some prototypes surrounding the idea of creating a game with the two worlds simultaneously, with gameplay occurring at the same time. The idea was always there, but the timing was never quite right."

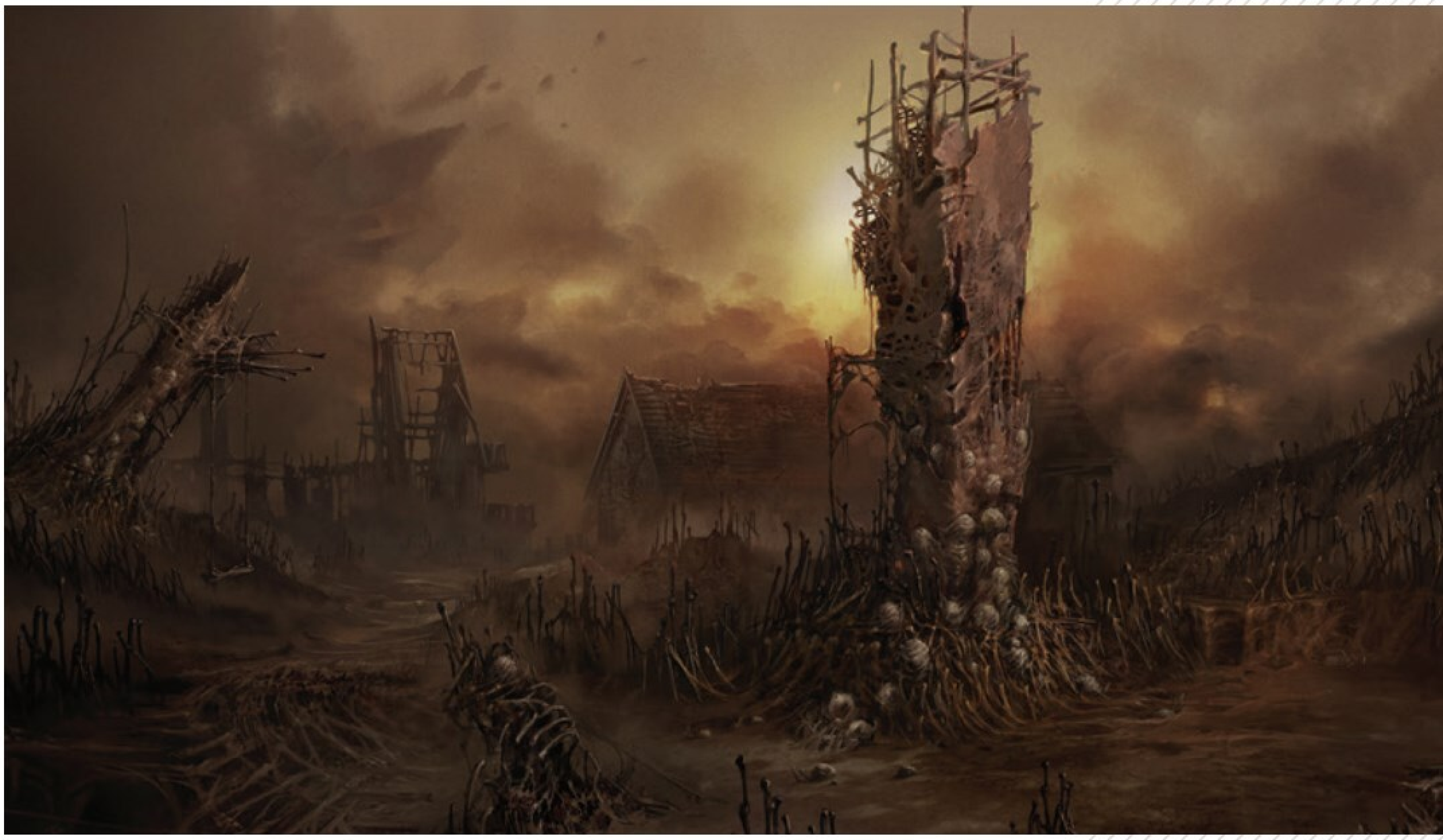
"The idea of two experiences happening at once is hard to implement," Zięba adds. "The first iteration of The Medium was actually a platformer game in the very beginning. With the Xbox 360, it became easier to play with 3D environments and different camera angles for various approaches to the game, but it's only with this generation that the vision of two worlds at once was actually doable."

With two worlds come two different experiences. In its reveal trailer, gamers saw their first glimpse at The Medium's dualistic journey in action. Everything about the two worlds is different, which means that the team had to pay special attention to detail when crafting both reflections. "We have two worlds, two games rendered at the same time, and previous generations just weren't that powerful," Piejko says. "When we took over this project, it gave us a new approach to The Medium's story. New technology was like a new language, it gave us more freedom with the story itself. While we were thinking of this game for the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, it wasn't until this new generation where we felt the time was right."

Another important feature about developing The Medium outside of the Xbox's SSD is the use of level streaming. This feature makes it possible to load and unload map files into memory, making them visible during a play session. This juggling of so many narratives and components made it to where the story and experience matched up to Bloober's vision, a smooth ongoing adventure. It's because of level streaming and the powerful SSD that there are zero load times in The Medium.

"This generation of gaming is the most crucial," Piejko says. "The need for downscaling is significantly lower. It's so much more than just better graphics; how the entire system works is different. How many things players can see on a screen at once has changed dramatically, which gives developers more tools to create the worlds they want. Everything is changing from era to era, but right now? The level of detail, the freedom of physics is much higher."

With so much talk about the two simultaneous worlds, how does that duality play out? Is it fluid? Are there breaks in immersion? According to Zięba, this shift in worlds can be at the player's whim. "At the very beginning of the game, you are starting in a normal world and then something sucks you into the spirit world. It's then that a split in the screen takes



place, allowing both levels to be seen at the same time. But, we don't want the player to be bored, so they can have the option to turn this off during certain points. Sometimes, the player will be able to switch the worlds on demand, but sometimes the game itself takes control. You know, for that element of surprise."

Another aspect of this new generation is ray tracing, and it is so much more than just making a game "prettier." This technology makes games closer to the intended vision of devs, creating realities in subtle ways beyond cleaner lines. "It's great because the color black is finally black," Piejko says. "Adding little details to the base environment, like a little gray tinge to a completely black environment, allows for the player's imagination to fully kick in and that's when the horror element truly sets in. Even without the monsters, that imagination is propelled and reinforced by ray tracing's capabilities. The world is ever-changing and it's beautiful, especially when now these in-game worlds look more realistic than ever before.

"Ray tracing is used for different purposes, like better attenuation of music, or depth perception in relation to the in-game world," Piejko continues. "Seeing how a ray of light interacts with the environment gives the illusion of the time of day; it's all very cool, both with the look and sounds of any game, but especially in horror."

With ray tracing being an important step, the team did confirm that The Medium will not be using the newly revealed Unreal Engine 5, instead it will continue to use Unreal Engine 4. While the version of UE4 being used is heavily modified, Bloober did not switch to UE5 because doing so would set back development immensely, causing the team to rebuild its entire system.

All of this tech is great, but it wouldn't amount to much if the story was lackluster. From what we've seen of The Medium, and given Bloober's previous history with games like Layers of Fear, the narrative appears complex and not reliant upon the usual horror tropes that this genre tends to fall into. When talking about some of the aspects of psychological horror that are often missed, the pair immediately said one thing: story.

According to Piejko,"Being able to take away the horror elements and still have a great story is important. Movies like *The VVitch*, for example. You take away everything that makes it horror and there is still a great story about the relationships in the movie."

"With The Medium, we have our monsters, we have our break from reality with those horror elements, but everything in that duality serves the purpose of the bigger story," Zięba adds. "At the heart, it's a story about perspective and how it changes as we receive new information. Sometimes, as people, we treat someone very bad because we've misjudged them. That's in this game. Our game is your story. Our story is crafted with this human experience that is built to constantly give the player more information to help formulate how they view this world and, hopefully, change their perspective." ◈

Women In Sports, And Why It Matters

by Kimberley Wallace, Features Editor

I've been a sports fan all my life. Whether I was playing on my school's team or going to Chicago Bulls games with my dad, sports dominated much of my time. I had the coordination and instincts, and when my friends were throwing the basketball granny-style, I was taking a squared stance and putting backspin on the ball. It was only a matter of time before I joined park-district leagues and school teams for everything from basketball to softball to cross-country and track, and yes, even badminton.

It's no surprise that my love for athletics led me to sports video games, and I've enjoyed being able to play as my favorite teams like my hometown Chicago Blackhawks in EA's NHL series. As sports games have evolved, the experience has become more personal, allowing fans to create players in their own likeness and go on more narrative-focused journeys, which has been great, but it always felt like I was never able to fully be a part of the experience as a female sports fan.

Outside of individual sports like tennis, where women have been included as playable options and graced covers, female representation has been mostly absent from sports games. However, in the last few years, we've seen more attempts to include these voices, and it's been wonderful to see. I loved how FIFA incorporated the USWNT into Alex Hunter's The Journey storyline, allowing you to play as his sister at some points and brush shoulders with stars like Alex Morgan. EA's NHL series made some big changes after receiving a letter from a then-14-year-old Lexi Peters, who tried to recreate her all-girls hockey team in the game and asked why there were no women players. EA Vancouver then added Peters as the first female hockey player in NHL 12. This led to players being able to create their own female skaters to use in Be A Pro and World of CHEL (the career and online modes, respectively), although it took until this year for the series to get your pronouns correct.

NBA Live led the charge in bringing the WNBA to the virtual screen for the first time in NBA Live 18, and it followed up by adding female players to the game's career suite in NBA Live 19. After rival NBA2K added the ability to play WNBA games last year, 2K Sports upped the ante for its new-gen versions by letting you craft a female player and build your own path to WNBA stardom in a new mode called "The W." This is the biggest push and commitment we've seen from a mainstream team sports game to represent female athletes and their experience. That's a pretty big deal.

The W doesn't just feel like tacked-on content for the sake of it being there. You dictate how your player spends her free time to make an impact on the league, with options such as helping at a youth camp to inspire a new generation of female ballers. It focuses on being a visible role model and bringing other young girls into the sport, which is fantastic. Outside of the amazing likeness to the real players, it also feels like playing in an actual WNBA game, which is more technical, with very precise ball movement. My favorite part is how much I've learned in general from the commentary about the league and its star players. I got so into the experience that I purchased my very own Chicago Sky jersey. Special moments like these show the power of bringing more awareness to the league. I hope this mode only continues to grow next year, because it sucks that it doesn't have a cinematic experience like the men's MyCareer mode and that your female avatar can't be used in The City, the online multiplayer community.

A few moments in my life stand out in my love of sports. One is my mother always telling me this story about how I used to watch my brother's basketball team, and I was so amazed when I saw two girls on it. She says she saw me light up when I realized people like me could play, too. Then I recall watching the USA Women's National Basketball Team at the Olympics. It was 1996, the year of Sheryl Swoopes and Lisa Leslie, and I remember being sad when it was over because it always felt like I had to wait four years to see that level of competition between women again. I had heard rumors about a professional league for women but was scared to get my hopes up. A year later, the WNBA officially started. I was in middle school, and we had to do a report on potential careers, and I immediately listed that as one of them. Obviously, it didn't happen, but something that never seemed possible before became a possibility in my adolescent mind, giving me something to strive for.

Even all these years later after hanging up my hoop dreams, booting up NBA 2K21 and playing as an athlete in my likeness gave me an adrenaline rush. This is the type of thing that brings more people into the game. In my book, that means everyone wins. I only hope more sports games take note and find more ways to include women's teams and leagues. It's been encouraging to see more efforts, even if there's still plenty of room to grow.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer

OCULUS QUEST 2 ANNIHILATES CABIN FEVER

After nine months of restricted gatherings and social distancing, the weight of the Covid-19 pandemic hangs overhead with such a tangible miasma that you can practically taste the boredom. It's easy to grow sick of doing the same things every day, especially if you're stuck in an apartment. But hey, at least there's virtual reality. When you plop a VR headset over your head and dive into a completely virtual universe, you can easily scratch that "go out and do things" itch. In fact, this is the best moment to get into VR. Thanks to the Oculus Quest 2, which sells at a bargain for $300, PC-quality VR is more affordable and accessible than it's ever been. The best part is that you don't even need a PC – this portable VR headset runs completely on its own.

How does the Oculus Quest 2 cut through cabin fever? When you put it on, you enter a completely virtual world, wherein an entirely new reality is superimposed over your field of view. When you crouch, jump, or peer around corners in real life, your avatar does the same thing in VR. And there are a vast wealth of experiences to have here; there's plenty to satisfy your craving for adventure, but there are also tons of opportunities for social interaction at live venues, cafes, and movie theatres as well. Live concerts like the one thrown by Major Lazer in the Oculus Venues app are growing increasingly common, and even the gym is seeing competition with great fitness apps like Supernatural, which has received *Time Magazine*'s Best Fitness Invention of 2020 award.

Better yet, the stunning visual quality and vastly improved performance of the Oculus Quest 2 over its predecessor make the time spent in virtual reality so much crisper and more enjoyable than ever before. Not only does the Quest 2 offer more power and freedom to move around your living space without needing to connect to a gaming PC or a console, the enhanced 90hz mode (vs the Quest's 72hz) makes gameplay feel incredibly fluid, and the almost 4K (1832 x 1920 per-eye) resolution offers outstanding visual clarity. It practically eliminates the notorious screen-door effect that made everything blurry on older VR headsets.

Unlike the Oculus Go and Gear VR that came before it, the Oculus Quest 2 is a 6DoF VR headset. This means that you can move around your environment with total freedom and your avatar will move with you. The included Touch controllers track your hand and finger movements, but they also provide haptic feedback that lets you feel objects in the virtual world as you touch and grip them. There's nothing more satisfying than the feel of drawing back an arrow on a bowstring, swinging a sword, or landing a knockout punch, and Oculus Quest 2's Touch controls feel tactile and weighty.

Also offered here is the brand new Qualcomm Snapdragon XR2 platform paired with 6GB of RAM, which doubles the performance capability of the Oculus Quest 2 over its immediate predecessor. This means that Quest games and apps run much smoother than before, but it also opens up new possibilities for much richer, deeper experiences; you can now venture alongside classic Star Wars characters in Star Wars: Tales from the Galaxy's Edge, survive the zombie apocalypse in The Walking Dead: Saints & Sinners, and much more.

You can enjoy virtual reality for two solid hours without ever plugging the Quest 2 into a wall, but for PC gamers who are appropriately equipped with an Nvidia GTX 970 equivalent or higher, this also doubles as a fully PC-compatible VR headset. With a USB-C to USB 3.0 Oculus Link cable (sold separately), you can plug your Quest 2 into the Oculus Rift app on your gaming PC for however long you'd like.

And while you're at it, you can fully immerse yourself in a deep roleplaying game like Asgard's Wrath, drop into the pilot's seat with Microsoft Flight Simulator, or you can even jump into SteamVR and experience the highly lauded Half-Life: Alyx with stunning visual clarity. The included Wifi-6 antenna makes it possible to cast gameplay at high fidelity, making it easy for you to show off your moves and share your best moments with friends across the world.

Pretty much everything you do on your Oculus Quest 2 is designed to immerse you as fully and completely as possible. It features a light frame with foam padding that fits smoothly and comfortably on your head, eliminating balance issues that existed on the original Oculus Quest. The included 3D audio system has also been thoroughly improved. You can now clearly hear positional audio with the included speakers, though it works even better when you match it with a pair of 3D headphones.

It's never been a better time to go out while staying in. In sum, VR is a powerful tool to help you cope with daily life spent indoors and away from other people, and it's no argument that the Quest 2 offers the absolute best value as an entry point into the immersive new medium that's been relatively inaccessible in the past. It's easy to feel a bit lost and helpless in the beginning, so we recommend checking out Road to VR's list of top 20 best rated & most rated games & apps for November 2020.

The future of VR looks especially bright with upcoming releases like Pistol Whip 2089, Warhammer 40,000: Battle Sister, and Myst VR. Everybody has something to look forward to: whether you're excited to travel back in time and trudge across the trenches in Respawn Entertainment's upcoming Medal of Honor: Above and Beyond, or you want to remember what it felt like to sit down in a movie theatre with friends in BigScreen, or you just want to get back into a fitness routine and improve your mental health. The leap into virtual reality has never been as attractive as it is right now.

You can start shopping for your Oculus Quest 2 today. The starting price is $300 for the 64 GB model, but many upcoming Quest 2 games and apps are space-intensive, so we recommend going all-in and nabbing the 256 GB model for $400. ◆

Game Informer sponsored content

AUDEZE PENROSE
WIRELESS PLANAR MAGNETIC HEADSET

by Matt Miller & Ben Reeves

For a pitch-perfect headset to accompany your new-gen consoles, look no further than the Penrose for PS5, PS4, PC, and Mac; or the Penrose X for Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and PC. Both are also compatible for use on Switch, iOS, and Android devices. The planar magnetic driver technology offers remarkably crisp and accurate sound, with clarity that is hard to match without escalating into more expensive professional-grade sets. You can simultaneously pair to a console and a separate mobile device, enabling independent chat or music from your phone alongside game sound from your console. The detachable mic is precise and clear and does a stellar job of reducing ambient noise. Separate volume knobs for the microphone and headset allow easy tweaking on the fly. The contoured, memory foam, over-ear pads are comfortable, but the faux leather and 320-gram weight may make those sweaty matches even mistier. However, those are minor quibbles on an otherwise standout gaming-audio solution.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

$299 | audeze.com

1 Twinkly Razer Chroma RGB Lights

Quit playing in the dark. Twinkly has an assortment of decorative light strings that can add a splash of color to any room in your house. The company recently teamed up with PC peripheral maker Razer to create a system that integrates Twinkly's entire range of products with Razer Chroma-enabled PC games. This allows your in-room lighting to react in real time to the events on your gaming monitor, creating a killer gaming atmosphere.

VERY GOOD 🟧🟧🟧🟧🟧🟧🟧🟧⬜⬜

$59.99 | twinkly.com

2 Jogoball Audio Gaming Console

Billed as an audio gaming console, the Jogoball combines six-motion axis sensitivity and a Bluetooth speaker that supports an array of built-in party games and activities, accessible via a free app. The ball can be tossed, shaken, and spun to input different commands and responses, enabling an active (and usually silly) twist on trivia, memory, and social games. The built-in narration is cheesy, and the included games are hit or miss, which is a shame at this price. But for players who have fond memories of old games like Bop-It and Simon, this feels like an evolved and much expanded twist on active motion play.

AVERAGE 🟧🟧🟧🟧🟧🟧🟧⬜⬜⬜

$119 | yogibo.com

3 Peak Designs Everyday Sling

If you still don't have a Nintendo Switch case you love, check out Peak Designs' classy slings. Not only do these stylish bags make great console carriers, but they're also perfect for transporting camera equipment and laptops. The Sling's padded cross-body strap features a quick-adjuster, so you can guarantee that your personal items are secure and safe whether you're on a bike trip or a stroll around the lake. ◆

Starting at $79.99 | peakdesign.com

TAMSYN MUIR
GIDEON
THE NINTH
TASHA'S CAULDRON OF EVERYTHING

AT THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS VOLUME I ILLUSTRATED BY FRANÇOIS BARANGER

François Baranger delivers stark and beautiful illustrations to bring H.P. Lovecraft's classic horror story to life in new ways. Images are splayed across massive folio-format pages, and the frozen environments of Antarctica look as striking as they are ominous.

$33.00
frialigan.se

GIDEON THE NINTH BY TAMSYN MUIR

Startling in style, the first novel installment of Muir's Locked Tomb Trilogy combines a punk-rock aesthetic with equal parts fantasy, necromancy, and outer-space sci-fi. It's a bleak, funny, and in-your-face twist on expectation from beginning to end.

$26.99 (hardcover)
$17.99 (paperback)
tor.com

TASHA'S CAULDRON OF EVERYTHING D&D RULES EXPANSION

This treasure trove of new expanded and optional rules for D&D is one of the biggest expansions to 5E rules to date, including new subclasses and feats, ways to modify racial traits, and new spells and magic items, among other additions. There's even a selection of pre-built puzzles ready to drop right into your next session.

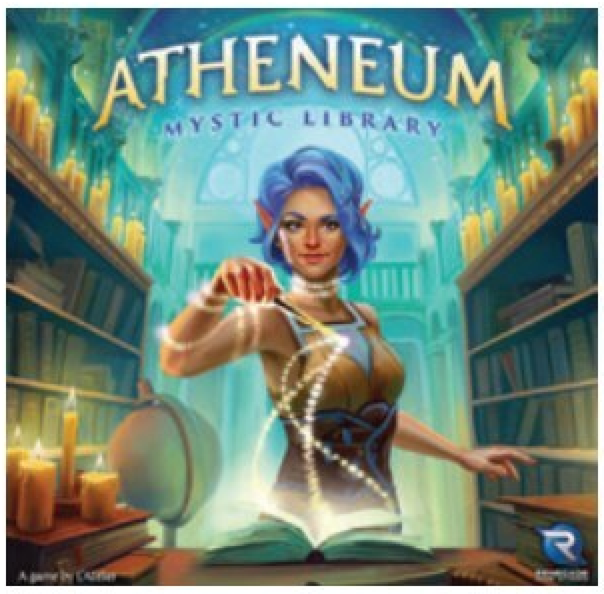
$49.95
dnd.wizards.com

THE BEST TABLETOP GAMES OF 2020

The board-gaming hobby continued its march onto dining-room tables this year, offering relief for families, friends, and roommates sharing in lockdown. Amid an extraordinary mix of game styles and settings, these were 10 of the very best new releases, each promising the potential for hours of shared fun.

by Matt Miller

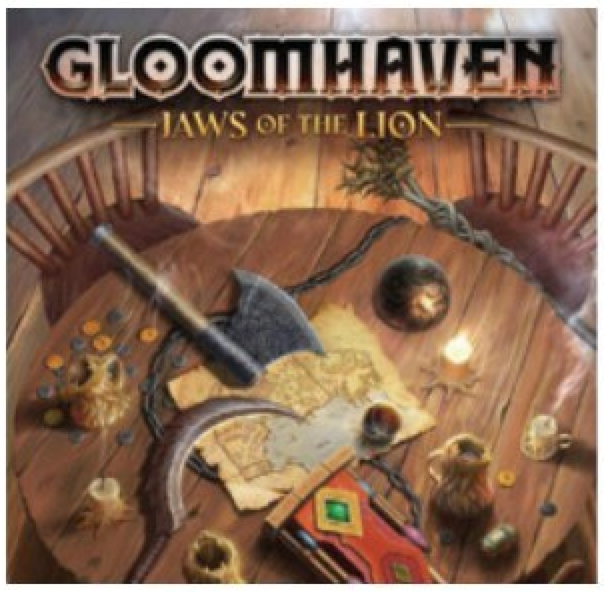
Discover more of the best tabletop games of 2020, including a round-up of the best role-playing game releases of the year, at gameinformer.com/topofthetable



Atheneum: Mystic Library

(Renegade Game Studios)

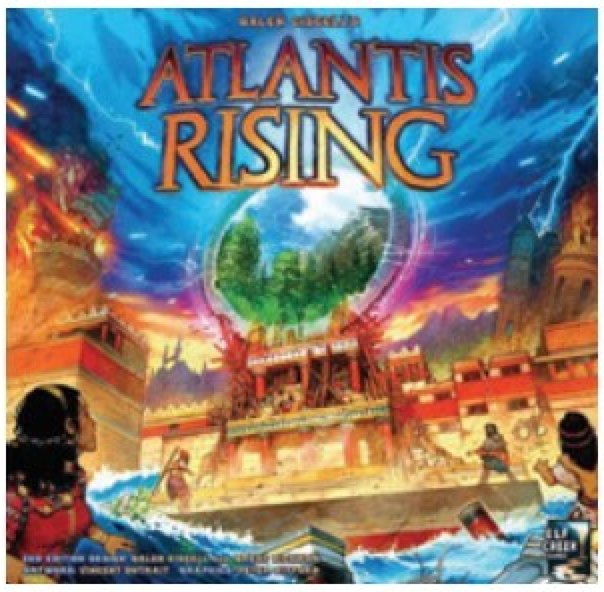
On the eve of your magical exam, you have a lot of spells to study, but you can't forget to re-shelve the books before you're done. Atheneum is filled with charm and lovely components (including individually named book chips), but it's the solid card-drafting system that really makes the magic work. Players succeed not only through their own played cards, but also through the cards their neighbors deploy, leading to a fascinating interplay. Whimsical and easy to grasp, it's a great fit for fans of wizarding wands and worlds.



Gloomhaven: Jaws of the Lion

(Cephalofair Games)

One of the best games of 2017 was the sprawling Gloomhaven, a rich but deeply complex dungeon-crawling game of tactical combat that featured a persistent world from one session to the next. Jaws of the Lion is a standalone prequel game built from the ground up to be a more casual introduction, and it does so with aplomb. If you fall in love, you can even transfer the four new characters to the original, larger game.



Atlantis Rising (2nd Edition)

(Elf Creek Games)

A phenomenal revival of an already excellent game, this cooperative worker-placement game challenges everyone to work together to gather resources and build a cosmic gate to evacuate the mythical city of Atlantis before it sinks beneath the waves. Even as available spaces slip away into the ocean, each player must plan carefully to hold back the tide and balance risk and reward. Tense and intricately balanced, only thoughtful teamwork can save the day.

DUNE
IMPERIUM

Dune: Imperium

(Dire Wolf Digital)

The worlds of Frank Herbert's classic sci-fi epic are brought to vivid life in this brilliant and complex new game of political machinations, desperate alliances, and outright warfare. With artwork inspired by the upcoming film, along with character powers nodding to the original narrative, this feels like a natural continuation of the fiction. Players are faced with tough decisions in every round, and everyone must nurture their own plans while actively subverting opponents to have any hope of controlling the spice, and by extension, the universe.

FORGOTTEN WATERS

Forgotten Waters

(Plaid Hat Games)

Plaid Hat's wonderful Crossroads games leverage clever mechanics to create an interactive narrative. After the zombie outbreaks and outer space colony ships seen in previous games, the latest twist is a lighthearted, mostly cooperative romp into an exaggerated and enchanted world of pirates. Aided by a robust web app that includes evocative voiceover work, you sail the high seas and make compelling choices that shape the world around you. It's funny, richly imagined, and quite simply one of the best story-focused games in a long time.

Fort

(Leder Games)

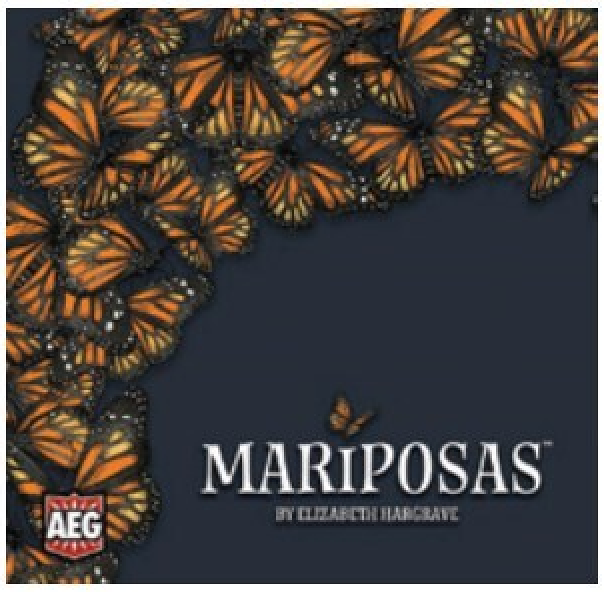
You're a kid, making friends and trying to build a better fort than your buddy. That simple premise is supported by some delightful and playful illustrations splashed across the cards you construct into a growing deck over the course of the game. The cards represent friends, and if you don't play with them, they may get lured by pizza and toys to a competitor's fort. Brisk play times and smartly structured rules make this a fun competition for both older kids and kids at heart.

RICHARD GARFIELD
HALF TRUTH
KEN JENNINGS

Half Truth

(Studio71)

A collaborative design venture between Magic: The Gathering creator Richard Garfield and Jeopardy champ Ken Jennings, this party game is an outstanding new twist on trivia gameplay. On each card is an unusual category – i.e., "Molecules that have oxygen in them," or "Star Wars characters who say they 'have a bad feeling about this'" – and six potential answers, but only three are correct. Lay bets only on the ones you're sure about; no points if you get one wrong!



Mariposas

(Alderac Entertainment Group)

The designer of last year's superb Wingspan, Elizabeth Hargrave, returns to nature themes again, this time examining kaleidoscopes of Monarch butterflies and their remarkable migratory patterns. Players gradually move their butterfly families north and then back south over the course of three distinct seasons, all while collecting flowers, reproducing new generations, and stopping at waystations along the way. It's a beautiful and approachable game well-suited to a mix of experience levels.

PANDEMIC
LEGACY
SEASON 0

Pandemic Legacy: Season 0

(Z-Man Games)

It's become a sure bet; if a new Pandemic Legacy game comes out, it's going to be great. This third installment proves the rule, catapulting players back in time to tell a Cold War-era spy prequel tale about the origins of a horrific Soviet bioweapon that might one day threaten the human race. The injection of enemy agents and covert operations do wonders to refresh the formula, but the real thrill still arises from the ever-changing game rules and components, which shift from one session to the next in response to your wins and losses.

TAINTED
GRAIL
THE FALL OF AVALON

Tainted Grail: The Fall of Avalon

(Awaken Realms)

Arriving too late in 2019 to be considered last year, Awaken Realms' rewarding adventure game shouldn't be overlooked. A lavishly imagined and shadowy narrative weaves together elements of Celtic mythology with classic Arthurian legend, and gorgeous miniatures and component art help sell the experience. Build a character through combat and other encounters, and uncover the mystery lurking at the heart of this dark fantasy.

» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
Stadia • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
IO Interactive

» DEVELOPER
IO Interactive

» RELEASE
January 20,
TBA (Switch)

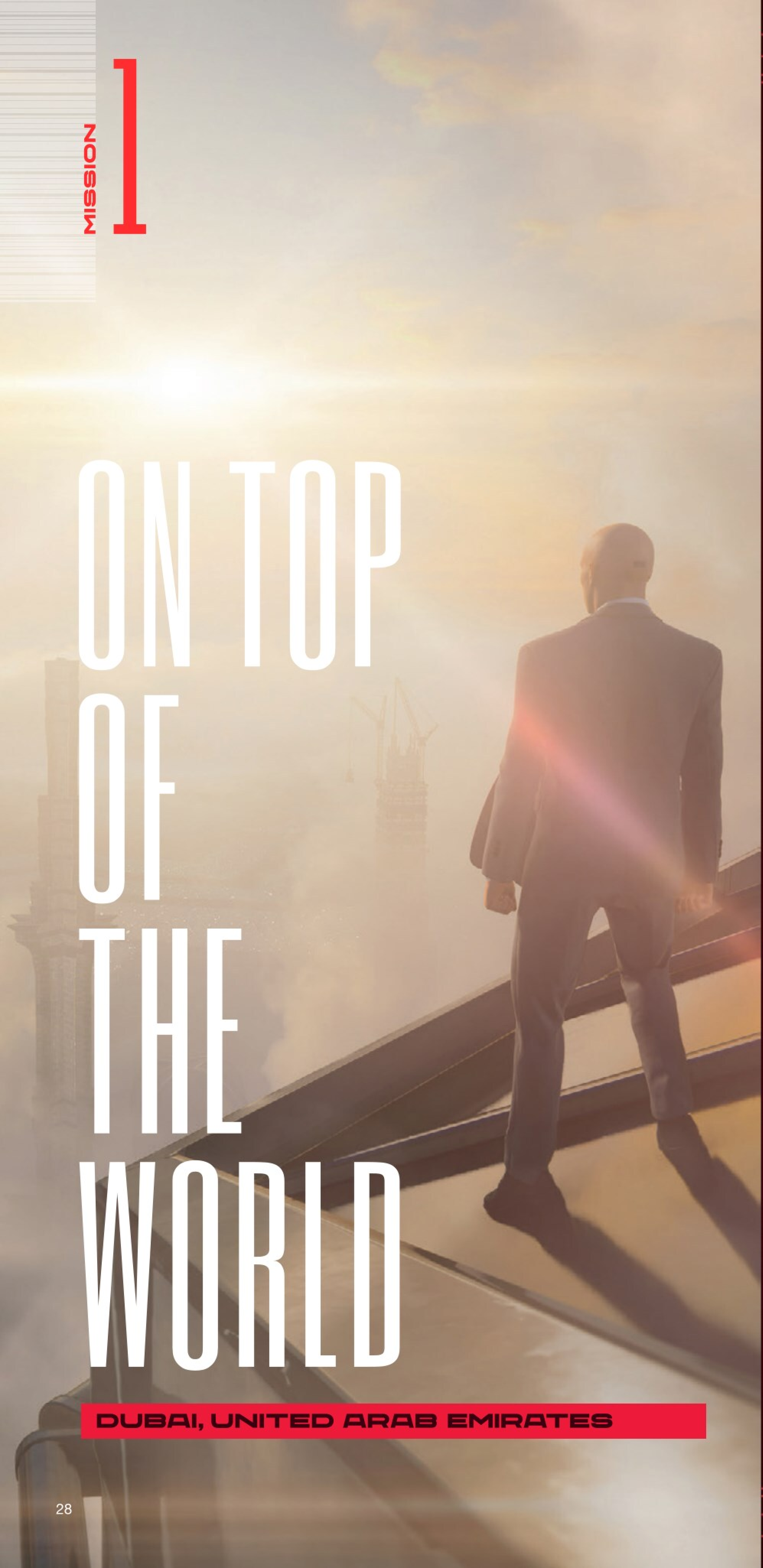
CUTTING OFF LOOSE ENDS

A

Hitman 3 marks the end of the series' World of Assassination trilogy – and possibly Agent 47 himself. It is also the beginning of a new era for IO Interactive

A shark walks among us. His physically unremarkable shell is the closest he comes to being human. He was designed to kill, to enact the will of his creators and handlers with unflinching brutality. Over the course of two decades, Agent 47 has established himself as one of the most formidable assassins in the business. He's motivated by instinct, not creeds or philosophies. His loyalties are to the mission at hand. He and his co-conspirators have systematically scoured the globe to uncover a shadow government called Providence. That group's time is nearly up, with its three leaders exposed and vulnerable. And in the background, seeds that were planted long ago are preparing to yield their bitter fruits.

BY JEFF CORK



MISSION 1

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

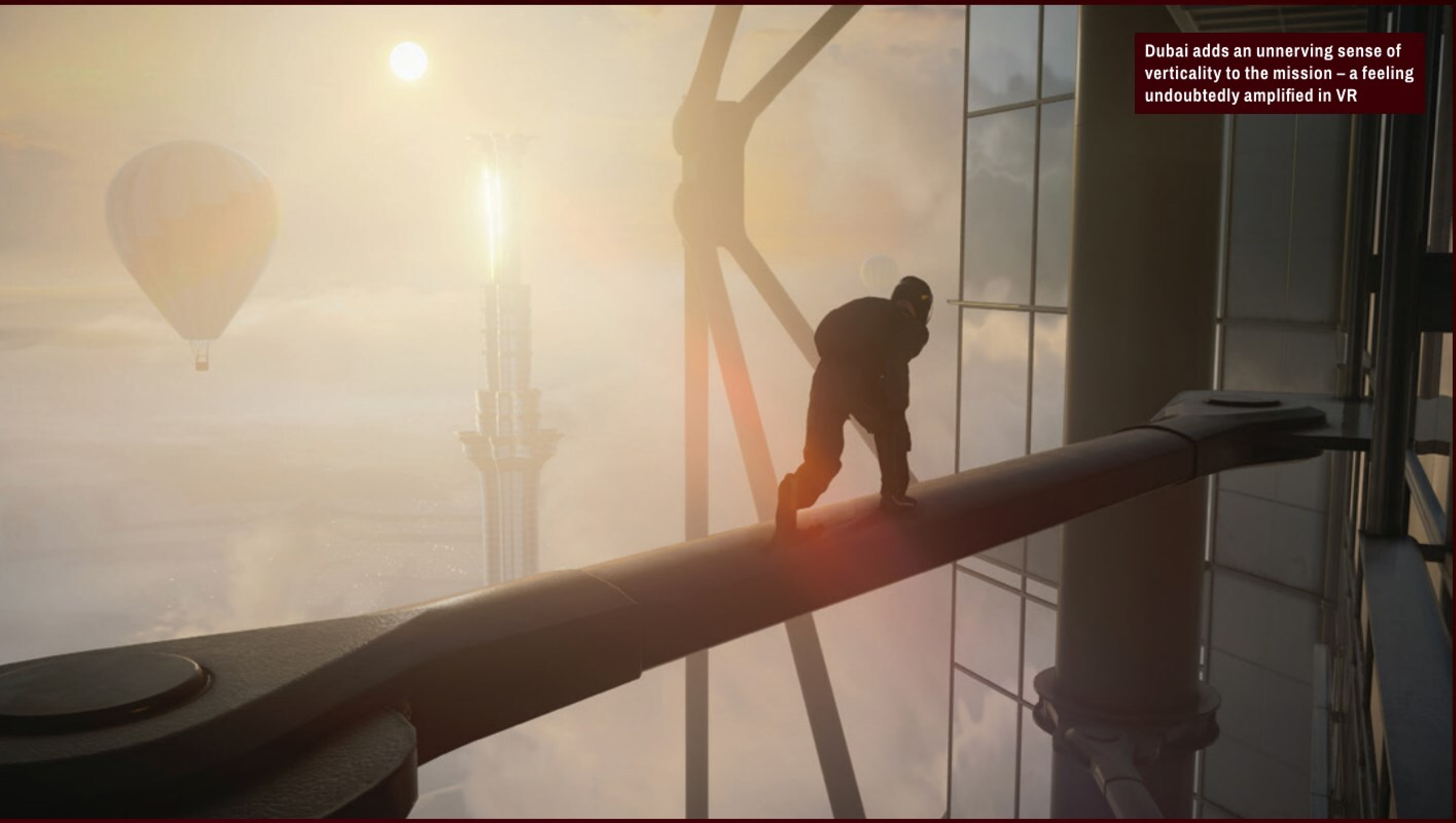
My first mission begins near the top at the Sceptre, which is being officially recognized as the world's tallest building. Members of the global elite have gathered in Dubai to witness the formal inauguration and enjoy the lavish celebration. I'd love to join them, but I haven't technically been invited. Of course, invitations are mere formalities for Agent 47. For the time being, I have a more pressing concern: getting inside. While I'm technically near the top of the structure, I'm on the wrong side of the glass, following a successful HALO jump.

Agent 47 is standing on a narrow girder that's only a few feet wide. I don't know exactly how high up he is, only that if he cranes his head up a little he can see the Sceptre's topmost floors. Looking at the surrounding haze, I can see the tops of a few hot-air balloons. Farther out, oil fields. It's a dizzying sight, and it's probably best to get inside. I wouldn't want to keep my targets waiting, after all.

I drop down onto one of the structure's massive support beams and begin working to find a way inside. I can see birds several stories below me, and even further down the tips of the buildings in Dubai's skyline. I accidentally bump into a toolbox that a careless worker has left on a platform, and it tumbles over the edge. Its contents scatter out with a metallic clank, and I watch as they shrink to pinpoints before vanishing out of sight. I can only hope that there wasn't anyone in its path on the sidewalk below. There's no time to dwell on that, however, since I see a window-washing platform ahead.

Naturally, the window is locked. Fortunately, I have a little help. Lucas Grey, the so-called Shadow Client (and Agent 47's frequent foil) is providing field support for the mission, and he instructs me to scan a nearby keypad with my camera – a new device that Agent 47 is packing for Hitman 3. After lining it up in my camera's viewfinder for a few seconds, Grey is able to commandeer the window and give me access inside. It certainly beats breaking the glass with a brick.

Game director Mattias Engström says the camera has several different uses throughout the game, which I get to experience during my extensive hands-on time with its first three missions. In addition to scanning items like these keypads, Agent 47 can use it to provide his handlers with in-the-field intelligence. It also works as a camera, with different zoom levels, filters, and more. As someone who loves to get in as close as possible to read messages on screens or notes on in-game desks, this sure beats hauling a sniper rifle around for its scope. And as part of the World of Assassination, the camera is being retrofitted into the legacy missions, which include new photography challenges. Before you ask, no, Agent 47 is not going to be taking any selfies.



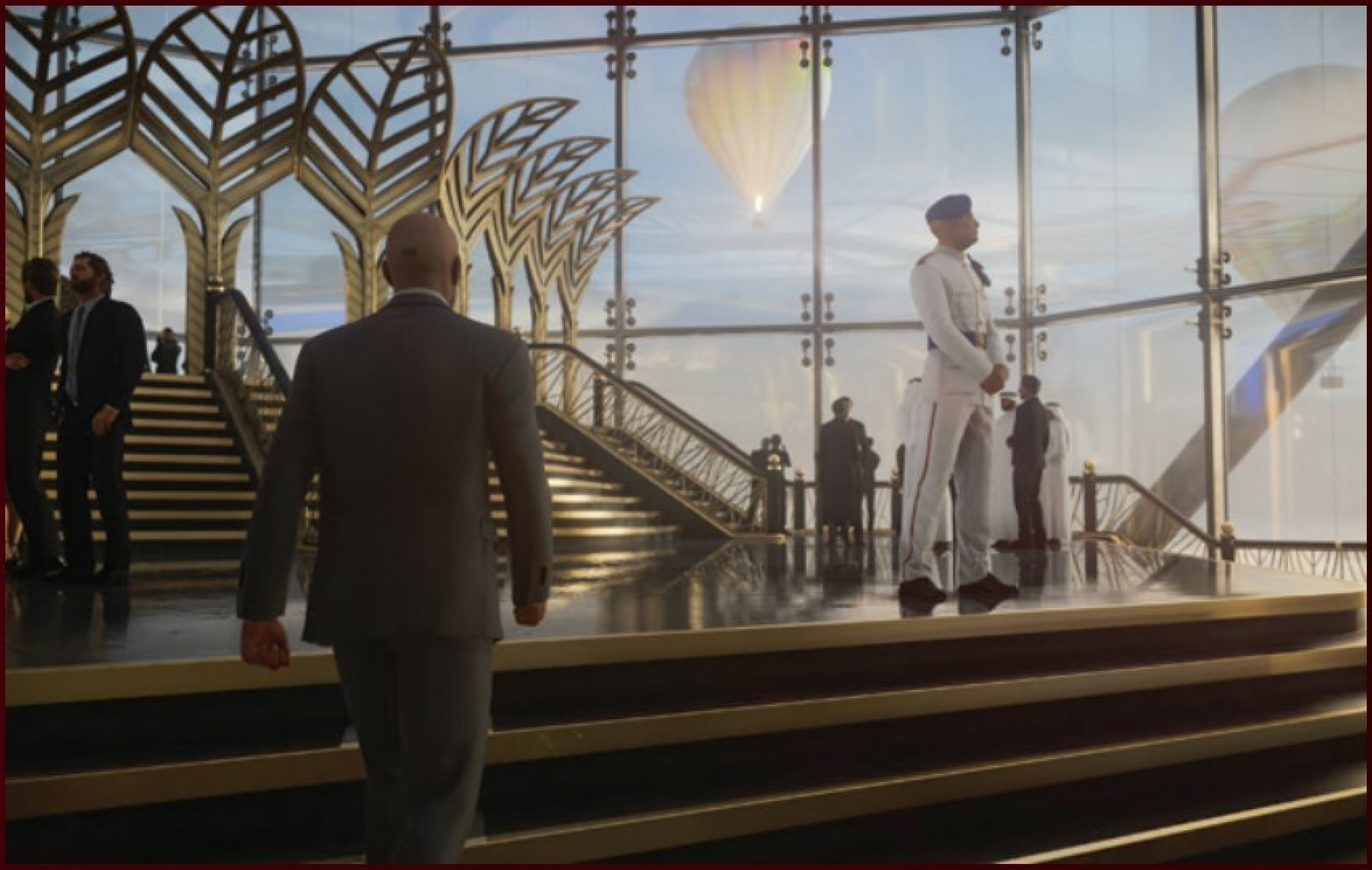
Dubai adds an unnerving sense of verticality to the mission – a feeling undoubtedly amplified in VR

Once inside the Sceptre, I wind my way through a narrow access corridor filled with pipes and cables. Grey takes the opportunity to remind me of the importance of the mission. The targets – Carl Ingram and Marcus Stuyvesant – are the heads of two of Providence's founding families. Hitman veterans will appreciate the significance; otherwise, all you need to know is that these two men help run a global shadow government that's essentially been pulling the strings in world affairs for more than 40 years. If these two men learn that we're here, they may get spooked.

If we're going to spook them, it won't be because we're not dressed for the occasion. We climb a ladder and walk through a curtain, emerging from the other side wearing a stylish gray suit. That baggy sky-diving gear and helmet may have done the trick getting us here, but they'd definitely raise a few eyebrows at this soiree. You'd think you could say the same for Agent 47's now-exposed trademark barcode tattoo, but we all know the routine by now: Nobody notices that, and we're fine with it.

I'm accustomed to seeing some incredible locations in Hitman games, but the Sceptre's interior is jaw-dropping. The building's interior is lavishly decorated, with an abundance of gold that covers everything from the railings on the balconies that line the entryway to the columns and architectural flourishes that are suspended high above the polished floors. It's a physical reminder that the Al-Ghazali family wields tremendous power, and that the strings they pull are gilded.

Ahead, I hear the murmur of a crowd, so I head up a grand staircase to see what's going on. As luck would have it, I'm just in time for the inauguration. Omar Al-Ghazali is giving a speech about this building being the culmination of a long-standing dream. He says it was all made possible after receiving a small loan from his father, which he was able to use to establish a construction empire that, ultimately, led us to where we all are today. He may have glossed over the parts about his family's ties to international terrorism, but for now we're focusing on the building. He proclaims that it's for all the people in Dubai, before cutting a gold ribbon with a sword. And with that, the Sceptre is dedicated. And now the puzzle begins. But before that, let's back up and talk about a misunderstood franchise.



THE SILENT ASSASSIN

The Hitman series is deceptively simple: You play as Agent 47, a skilled assassin who travels the world taking out targets. Most games drop the character into sandbox-style levels, giving players the freedom to explore their surroundings and come up with a plan that best suits their playstyle. While it's absolutely viable to go loud, grabbing guns and taking out enemies in commando-style raids, that's almost never the best course of action.

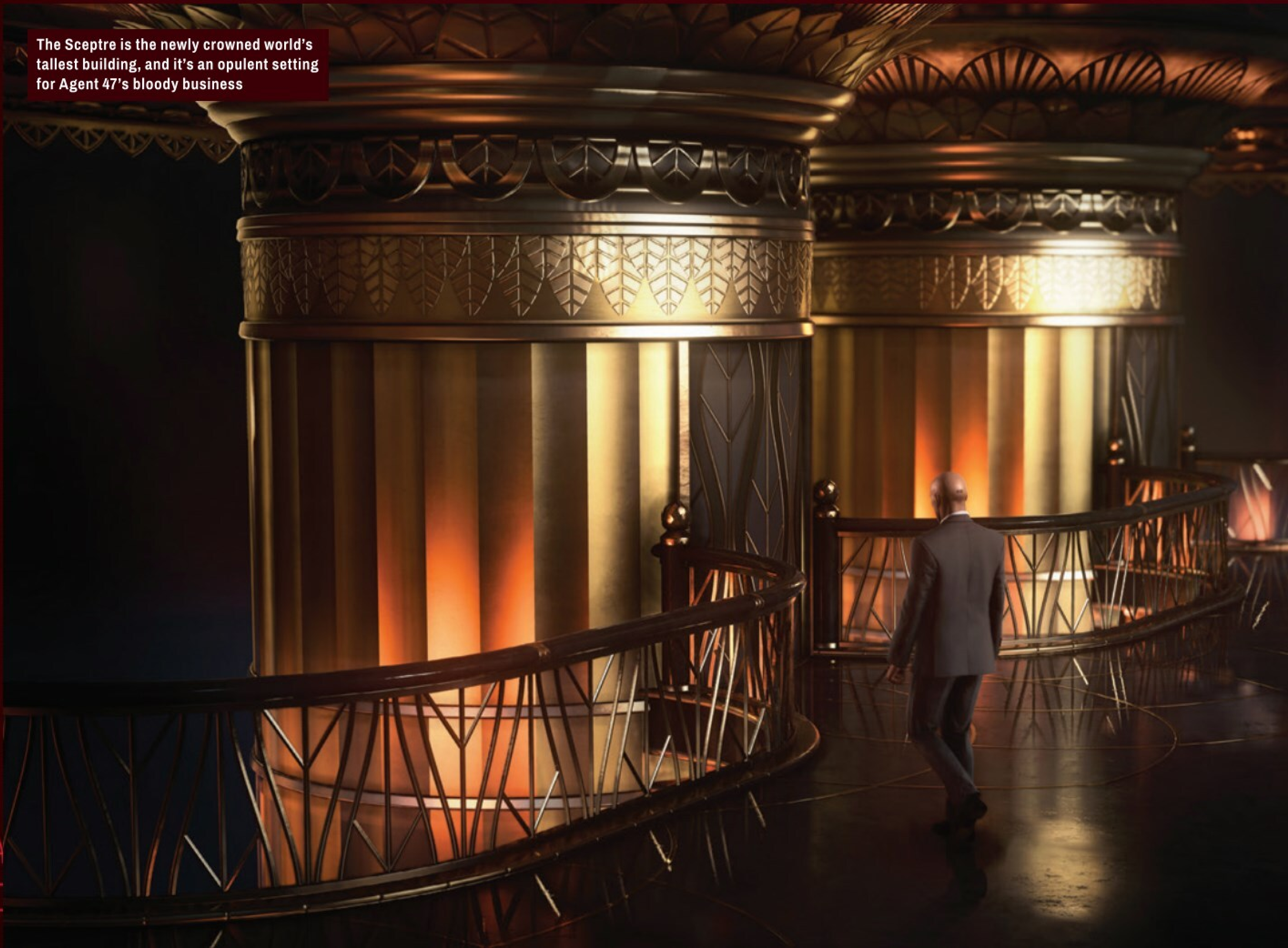
"Once you understand all the possibilities, how deep it is, and how much freedom you have as a player – all the nuances – it's pretty amazing," says executive producer Forest Swartout Large. "I think a lot of people just look at screenshots and think that it's an action/shooter."

Instead, the most rewarding moments in a Hitman game come from taking the time to surveil, listening in on conversations to figure out security gaps or points of vulnerability. If you're a "go-go-go" type player, Hitman's lengthy periods of inactivity may seem excruciating, but they're also a large part of why successfully hitting your objectives and slipping away undetected can be so rewarding.

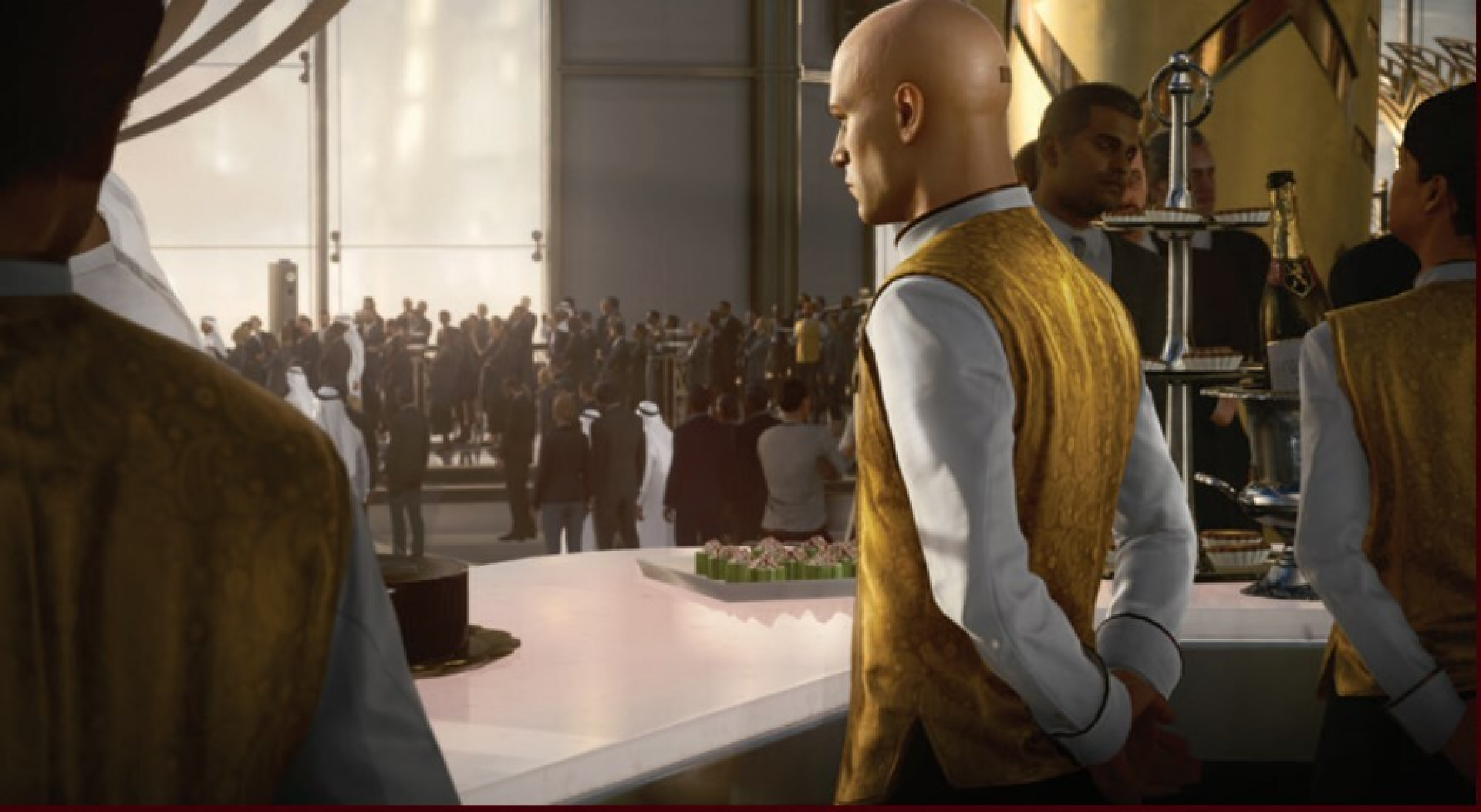
"It's a game about patience, and it has a certain aspect of voyeurism where you're just looking into peoples' private lives," Engström says. "You're meant to take it slowly and figure out the puzzle and then it's up to you how to solve it, basically. It's hard to put that into a trailer."

When the team at IO Interactive talks about Hitman being a puzzle game, they don't mean Agent 47 has to solve Tower of Hanoi challenges or push crates onto pressure plates. Instead, each sandbox level is hand-crafted to be an intricate puzzle box. Calling them "levels" or "sandboxes" is a disservice to the designers, however. Every mission is a methodically detailed showcase, taking players to Paris for a fashion show or to the fictional Italian seaside town of Sapienza, for instance. Once you arrive, you're given your objectives and free rein; if you want to disguise yourself as the waitstaff and poison your target, go nuts. Or maybe you could arrange a private meeting with your prey – after walking the runway as a model, of course. Once you get into its peculiar rhythms, coming up with a plan (no matter how ludicrous it may seem) is the easy part. Executing it is the challenge.

In many levels, one of the tricks is figuring out how to even approach your targets. Hitman 2's Miami level is a perfect example. It's set in and around a racetrack, and one



The Sceptre is the newly crowned world's tallest building, and it's an opulent setting for Agent 47's bloody business



of your targets, Sierra Knox, is participating in a race. If you activate Agent 47's instinct mode, which desaturates the colors and highlights targets in red, you can see her tiny silhouette whizzing in circles in the distance. The puzzle then becomes: How can you get access to her? Can you intervene during a pit stop? Or maybe wait until the victory celebration? Different options reveal themselves as mission stories if you explore and listen enough, giving more structured objectives that often have darkly comical or horrifying resolutions.

Back in the Sceptre, I turn on instinct mode for a few seconds and see the tiny figures representing my targets high above me. According to the mission briefing, Ingram is in his private suite on the sheikh's penthouse floor. Stuyvesant, on the other hand, is checking out an art exhibit inside the building. I'm weighing my options near the hors d'oeuvres table when a conspicuous ponytailed man in a burgundy blazer walks up and starts peppering the server with questions. He's particularly curious about the guest list, which is clearly beyond the scope of this woman's job or interest level. She deflects, telling him to talk to security. He wanders away, and I follow at a safe distance.

We're about halfway to a guard post when Grey interrupts my surveillance of Mr. Ponytail with a request. He says he wants to address the Providence partners directly, so they can fully understand why they're being killed before I handle the task. As effective as it may be to, say, drop a piece of art onto Stuyvesant's noggin, Grey isn't interested in making this look like an accident. He wants these men to suffer first. To do so, that means we'll have to get them both together. He has an idea, but it requires accessing a building directory first.

Grey's plan sounds like a winner, but I can't resist listening to ponytail guy make his case to a clearly disinterested guard. He asks if the guard has access to the guest list, adding that he's done some investigating and found a couple of particularly cryptic names. The guard isn't having any of this, and he tells off the partygoer/sleuth. I file this little bit of info away, determined to follow this thread further along the next time I replay the mission. In the meantime, I see a kiosk.

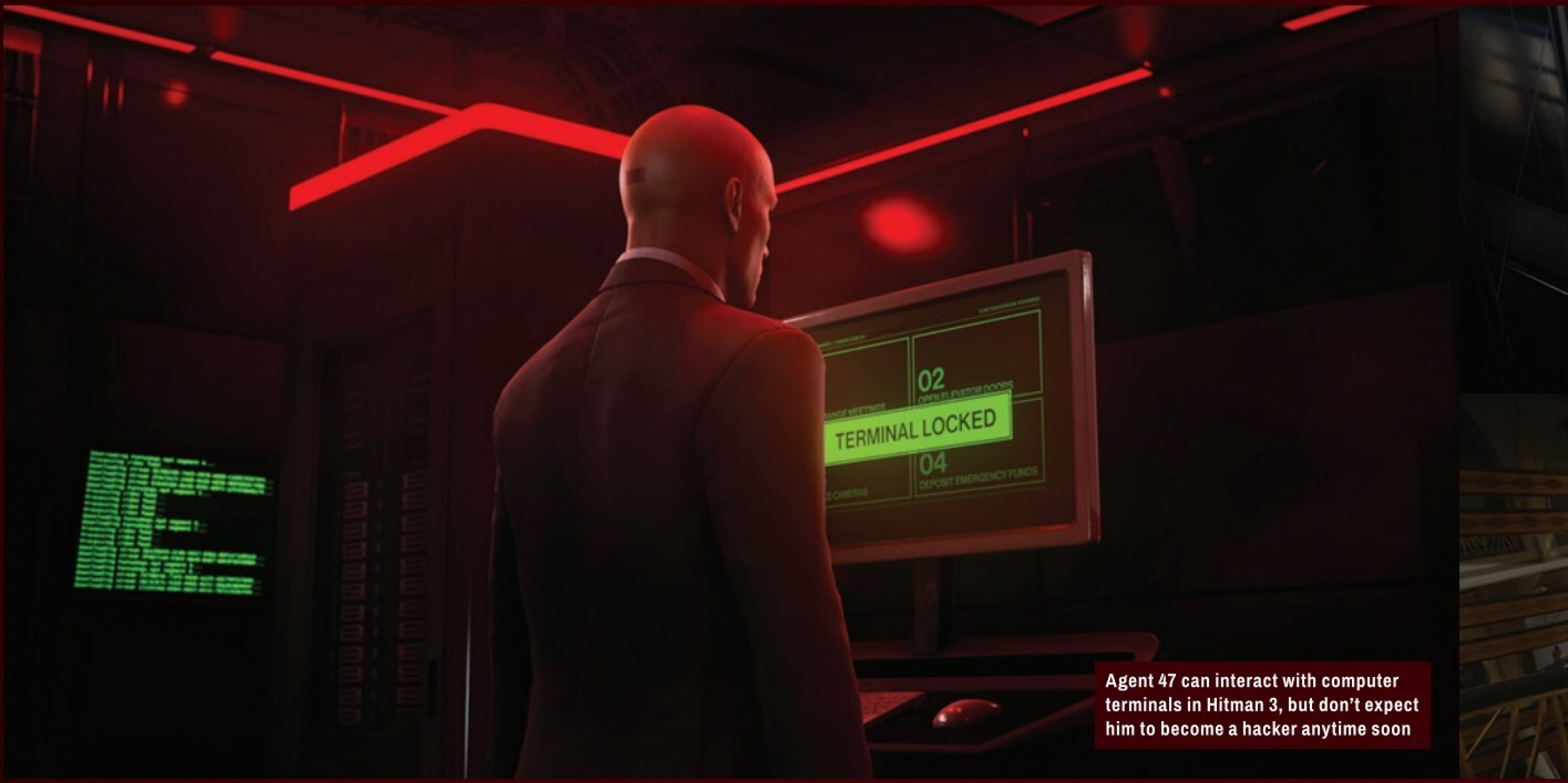
It's not a major addition, but Hitman 3 adds some nice touches like interactive computer terminals. In this case, I'm able to interact with the terminal, and then choose different menu options such as learning more about the sheikh, or, more relevantly, get a look at the building's floorplan. Grey says that I'll need to worm my way into the server room via the staff area, which is a key step for him to deliver his personalized message. And with that, my plan is coming into focus.

WHERE DOES HITMAN DRAW THE LINE?

Death is an inescapable part of the Hitman franchise; even though your targets are almost always irredeemable monsters, you're still killing them. The series has given players creative ways to complete their missions over the years, sometimes comically (dropping a moose statue onto a target during a TV interview), sometimes disturbingly (drowning a man in a hot tub). Walking that tonal razor wire is challenging, particularly in a game that offers players so much freedom. That had me asking the question: Where does the team draw the line when it comes to violence in Hitman?

"I think we're careful," says game director Mattias Engström. "We do find ourselves in situations where we say no to stuff. Maybe it's too creepy or not aspirational enough. It's still a pretty brutal game, of course, so not to be hypocritical, but I think there are some things we stay away from. I think when it becomes too creepy or sexually predatory, that's what we want to get away from."

"An example of that is Alma Reynard from the New Zealand level in Hitman 2," says executive producer Forest Swartout Large. "We had to recast and rerecord her, because the original take was too young-sounding. We fixed that with a more mature-sounding actor, and we changed her outfit as well. We just weren't comfortable with the previous version. … We do celebrate player freedom, and we are offering a large and deep toolbox to the players, but we're the ones creating the tone and the environments in which the players are executing sometimes very brutal kills. We're creating and curating that toolbox, and it is a big responsibility."



Agent 47 can interact with computer terminals in Hitman 3, but don't expect him to become a hacker anytime soon

"For many players, that feeling of, 'Holy s---!' can be daunting," Engström says. "Especially on the bigger missions, where you go in and you have up to three dots and they're far away, and you're like, 'How am I even going to approach this?' It's exhausting, I think, for many players. But it's also one of the strengths of the game, right?"

The door to the staff area is, unsurprisingly, secured. There's a keypad next to the door, but Grey is able to access the camera feeds and see where someone has written the combination on a whiteboard. Oops. I punch in the code – again, like with the terminal, actually entering in the digits one at a time – and enter.

"I'm a huge fan of immersive sims, and I think the Hitman games aren't straight immersive sim games, but it definitely does straddle the line," Engström says. "I think a lot of the features that we did add in Hitman 3 are actually in the immersive-sim genre. Like, we have the keypad, which is one of the new set-pieces that we wanted to have. It's a new way for us to create a puzzle element for you to get behind an obstacle. How do we make sure that players find a password? That was something that players or our developers could use to create puzzles."

I'm now in the staff area, but I'm now officially trespassing and need to be cautious. Using instinct mode, I see some employees around the corner. Rather than choke one out in front of his friend, I decide to turn on a nearby vacuum and hope that somebody decides to investigate the sound. Before I hide, I grab a hammer from a nearby crate. Sure enough, the worker wanders over to turn off the device. I emerge and toss the hammer at his head. I'm not a huge fan of the gold brocade, but I take his event-staff outfit and drag the employee into a locker to sleep it off. Sorry, man.

The server room isn't a straight shot from here; I have to go out another window and do some more scaling and climbing. Even though heights don't usually wig me out, I'm not looking forward to dangling over oblivion again if I'm being completely honest. IO really did an effective job of conveying the sense of height that's at play here – and that's not even considering how it is in VR (see "Hitman VR" sidebar). As I learned, that was something that took some effort.

"The location kickoff, the keywords were 'vertigo' and 'verticality,'" says Swartout Large. "We wanted to make sure that we were really delivering on that promise, and Mattias [Engström] felt like, 'Yeah, we're not really coming through on that, so we need to look at what else can we do. How can we fix this?'"

"For the longest time, you always started inside of the elevator and you'd go up and you walked into the inauguration," Engström says. "That was cool and awesome, but you didn't really get the connection that you were super high up, and we didn't feel happy about the way that you're in the highest skyscraper in the world but it didn't connect immediately. We really wanted to have that feeling established immediately. Why not just start outside where the intro cinematic ends and let the player enter themselves?"

Or, in a few other cases, exit themselves. After some more back-and-forth between being on solid ground and feeling like I'm going to fall to my death, I'm in the server room. According to Grey, the targets know that moves are being made to undermine their power, and they're keen to retain it. We can capitalize on that by setting up a phony meeting with a third party by hacking their calendars, then luring them into a lounge area that can conveniently be sealed off. That functionality is ostensibly for privacy and security, but we're going to turn it into a trap.

The server room seems fairly secure, so I grab a disguise from a hapless maintenance worker just in case I run into any other employees. I pause by a nearby whiteboard

and see a bunch of notes scribbled on it, including a Post-it with a "Talk to Allan for details" message on it – a gag that's become one of the series' recurring Easter eggs.

Inside the server room, I see four massive banks of servers. There's a terminal in the middle of the room with calendar access, but it's currently locked. Grey tells me to pull one of the server racks out, which seems a little suspect. Sure enough, I pull one out at random and a silent alarm is tripped, putting the room on lockdown and shrouding it in an ominous red light. I hide behind one of the clusters while a pair of security guards investigate the issue. They go about their rounds, but I've played enough Hitman to know their usual behavior. That predictability is important.

"You have to be able to rely on the A.I.," Swartout Large says. "It has to be consistent. We will live with the stupid-seeming A.I. if it means that we're adhering to the rules of the game."

"We'd rather be in a place where the game is fun and interesting to experiment with, and also sometimes the A.I. will feel a little bit stupid," Engström says. "We are lenient in that way, and we don't want it to be hard. We can make some puzzles hard, and that's part of the puzzle element, but that's specifically designed to be that way. But the systems, they need to be wide and lenient enough for our players to experiment and have a good time figuring out the puzzle elements. You can make the A.I. look very stupid in some situations, and we say that's fine. When people put it on YouTube and laugh, we will laugh, too."

I won't spoil the rest of the mission, but, surprise, Grey's plan is ultimately a success. Along the way, I get a few tantalizing glimpses into some other potential scenarios, including one that involves a lockdown drill, thanks to a loose-lipped guard freely giving away the location of keycards and the passcode. My favorite, however, has to do with a disgruntled employee and an exploding golf ball. That may not have the elegance or sophistication of giving the partners a speech before killing them off in a hacked room, but it does sound like fun. And that balance between the absurd and grim is a fundamental part of the Hitman experience.

"I think the deadpan humor leaves so much room for the player," Swartout Large says. "Sometimes Hitman is, at its best, peak role-playing. That deadpan [tone] allows you to sort of put whatever flavor or spin or mood you're feeling in that moment."

Before he got involved in the Hitman series, Engström says he thought Agent 47's stoicism made him a little boring. But he's grown to love him, particularly how willing the assassin is to take a mission to its end, no matter how absurd it may be – even if that means dressing up in a mascot costume. "I think he has a way to play things super serious and he doesn't really care if he's a flamingo," he says. "And he's dressed up as a flamingo and he's going for a kill and it's pretty hilarious, but he doesn't really realize it himself. He's just playing it straight. There's some sort of irony in not seeing the fun in that himself."

HITMAN VR

PlayStation owners who pick up Hitman 3 will be able to play through the missions in VR at no additional charge. You have to pick up the legacy packs to play through earlier missions that way, but all of the World of Assassination trilogy is going to be available for PlayStation VR.

The team says it was curious to see how shifting Hitman's traditional third-person perspective into a first-person VR experience would work. Would the sandboxes translate well? Would the visuals hold up to that level of viewer scrutiny? Was the sound good enough to provide players with needed context?

"And what we found was, 'Oh my god, this game, we actually made it for VR without knowing it!'" says lead game designer Sidsel Marie Hermansen.

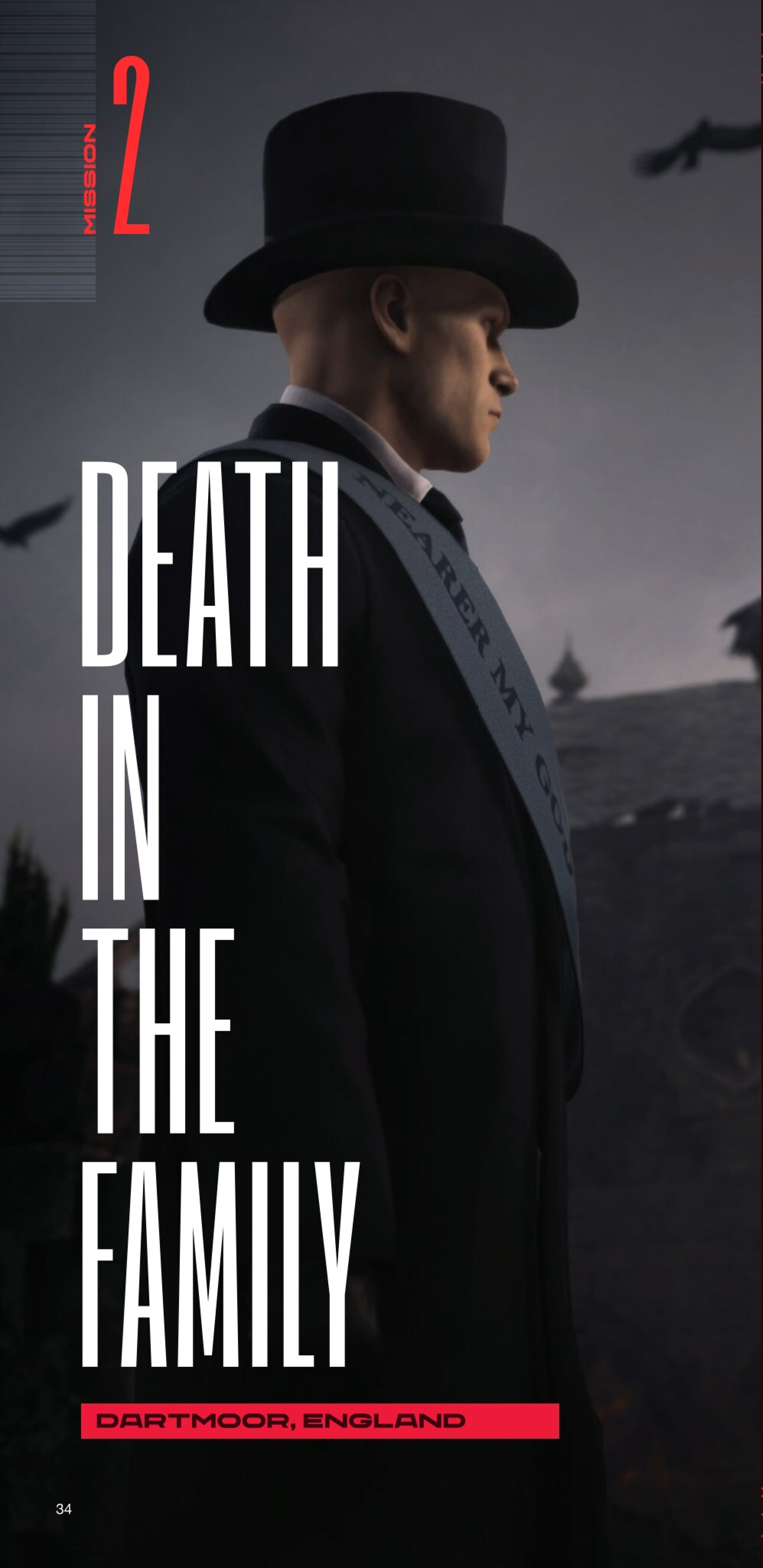
Any questions about the game's visual fidelity holding up when zoomed in via a first-person view were tossed out the window early on. Senior game designer Eskil Mohl gives an example that centers around an in-game USB stick. "It's an intel item, something you pick up and you just go, 'Bloop!'" In the normal version of the game, it's only a few pixels on the screen, and it's obscured by the UI. In VR, he says you can look at it closely and see that it was originally modeled with a little light on it and a detailer wrapper. "It almost had fingerprints on it," he says. Similarly, the team discovered that weapons that were never designed for first-person combat were modeled with details like functional holo sights – details that would have otherwise been unnoticed.

VR lets players become more attuned to the action, which can lead to humorous situations like having a virtual makeup artist dab brushes around your face while you're taking on the role of model Helmut Kruger in Hitman 2016's Paris level. It's also easy to see how the game's violence can take on a more intimate feeling in virtual reality. That wasn't something that was lost on the team, either.

"In that way, it actually feels more personal, the stuff you do," Hermansen says. "If you f--- up, if you have to murder some innocent civilian, then for me, personally, I feel pretty bad. I'm not going to do that again. Like, next time I'm going to do better, because it's on me to be a good assassin."

In addition to the metaphorical changes in perspective that VR may provide, the team is particularly excited about giving players a chance to experience levels in completely new ways. For example, the cover system has been reworked. You don't lock into a cover mode now. Instead, VR players can stay out of sight by physically crouching, and moving Agent 47's hands up to see if anyone can spot him. And players now have free-form movement with many of the game's weapons, which sounds like a liberating alternative to the original design's approach of using scripted animations for many of those attacks.

Hermansen says that what started off as a small experiment has turned into a passion project within the team, which numbers around a dozen or so core members. "That excitement has really driven us, and we've done much more than should be possible on a relatively small team because of the excitement," she says. "I don't know if that was surprising, but it's been a beautiful thing."



MISSION 2

DEATH IN THE FAMILY

DARTMOOR, ENGLAND

Originally, all three Providence partners were gathered at the Sceptre for its opening ceremony. It was an irresistible opportunity, even if Grey and Agent 47 were only able to dispatch two-thirds of the trio. The final member, Alexa Carlisle, realized that something foul was happening, and she fled to her family estate in England. Thornbridge Manor may be secluded, but she's about to learn that it's already been compromised from the inside.

The Carlisles have assembled to mourn Alexa, who is still very much alive. She's faked her own death, giving herself time to shore up Providence, which is now quite clearly a house of cards. Its former second-in-command, Arthur Edwards (aka "the Constant"), has been working behind the scenes to consolidate both that organization and the International Contract Agency that Agent 47 and his handler Diana Burnwood work within. It's a complicated situation made only further so by the revelation that, while Alexa is alive, there's still going to be a funeral at Thornbridge: Alexa's brother, Zachary, is dead. She suspects foul play, leading to one of the Hitman series' most fascinating missions yet. Don your tweediest coat and get your notebook ready – there's a mystery afoot!

Agent 47 arrives on the scene via motorcycle, which he discreetly parks away from the manor's main gate. It's a gorgeous sight, even though the weather is about as English as it gets. The skies are cloudy and gray, and a layer of fog clings to the surrounding moors. It all frames the manor itself, which is an imposing structure in the distance.

I slowly walk over to the main gate, staying out of the guards' sights the best I can. They've got their hands full at the moment. A man introduces himself as Phineas Witmer, a private investigator from London. The guards call the house to confirm his story that he's been summoned by Alexa herself. Once satisfied, they open the gate and let him in.

I follow along through some bushes, luring him closer by throwing a few coins his way. "A lot of our NPCs, they're poor," Engström jokes. Sure enough, Witmer leans over to pick up the prize and exclaims, "Killer!" at his good fortune. If only he knew. A well-placed punch later, and I'm back on the road in his clothes, with nobody the wiser. I'm welcomed by a member of the staff, and she says that things are very tense right now, as evidenced by the fact that people are being frisked by security before they're allowed inside. Fortunately, I didn't bring any firearms or prohibited items along with me during the mission's planning stage.

And with that, I'm led into the manor's large foyer. Moments later, I'm in the unusual situation of interacting with my target face-to-face only a few minutes after starting the mission. I could snap her neck right then and there, but that seems a little gauche, not to mention unnecessarily risky. Instead, I decide to hear her out and see why I (in my Whitmer disguise) was summoned.

Dartmoor's mission gives players a chance to solve a murder mystery while soaking up the English atmosphere

She tells me that she needs a situation handled. Her brother has been killed, and she wants me to investigate the crime scene. His death has been presented as a suicide, but something about it doesn't ring true. "In my experience, a thorough examination of a potential crime scene is half the job done," Agent 47 replies. She's a busy person, so she leaves me to Fernsby, the manor's butler, for further instruction.

"The wish to do a murder-mystery level has been strong and long-going at IOI, but it's always been daunting," Engström says. "How do we pull it off? Is it going to be a new killer every time, or do we want to go all-in on one story? It's all these things. And how do we tie it into the gameplay? It's not really core for Hitman, but at the same time it really, really fits a Hitman game. We talked a lot about this. Should we do it? Should we not? And then it was like, 'F--- it. Let's go for it, because it will be awesome.'"

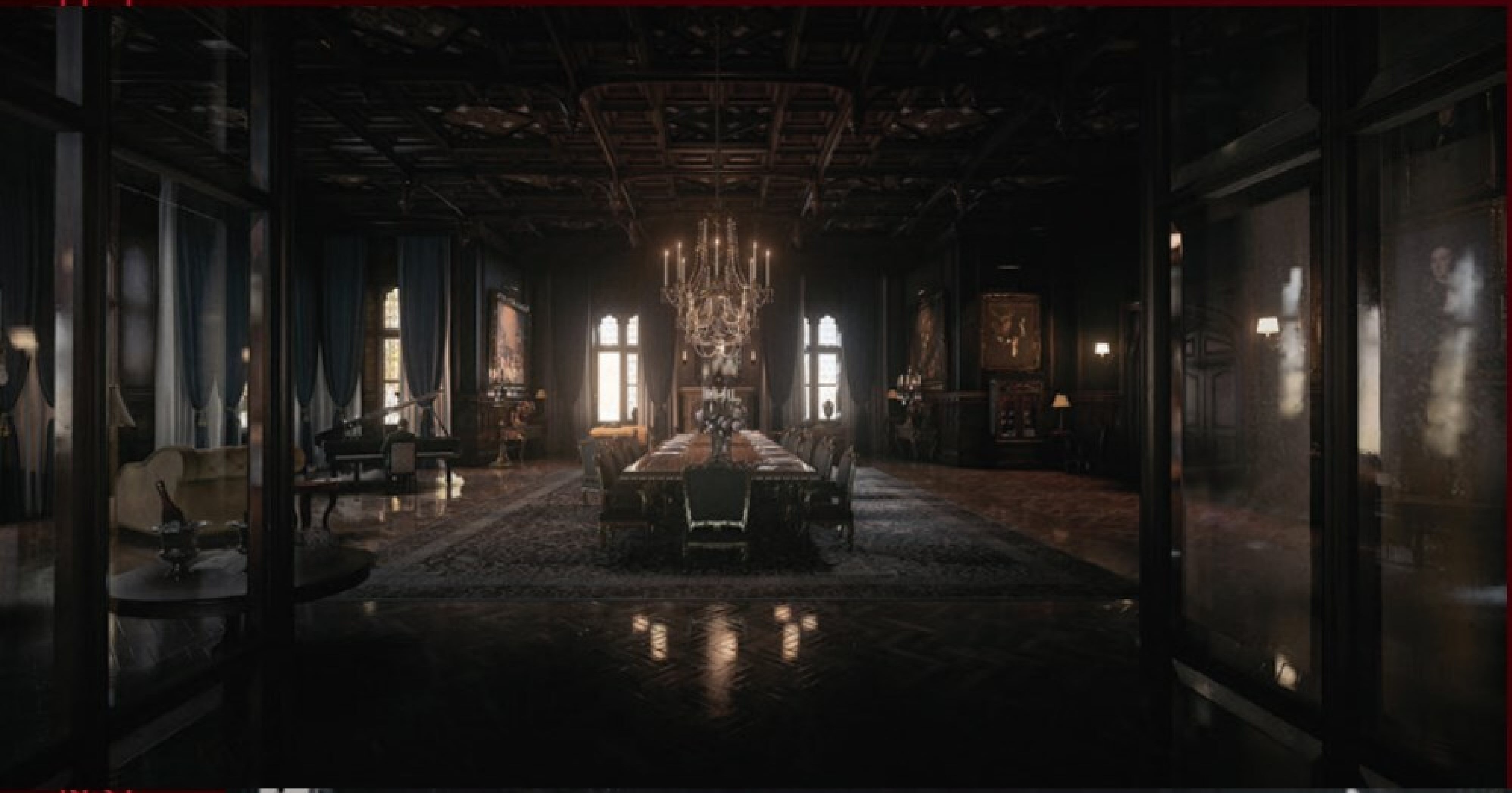
"Hitman 3, we definitely had the core fans in mind," Swartout Large adds. "This is closure for the fans. But selfishly, it's also for us, too. We saw this as an opportunity. All those things in the backlog, all those things that we dreamed about and talked about at the bar on Fridays – all the things that we wanted and previously have been too afraid to do or there wasn't enough time, we just said, 'Let's do it.'"

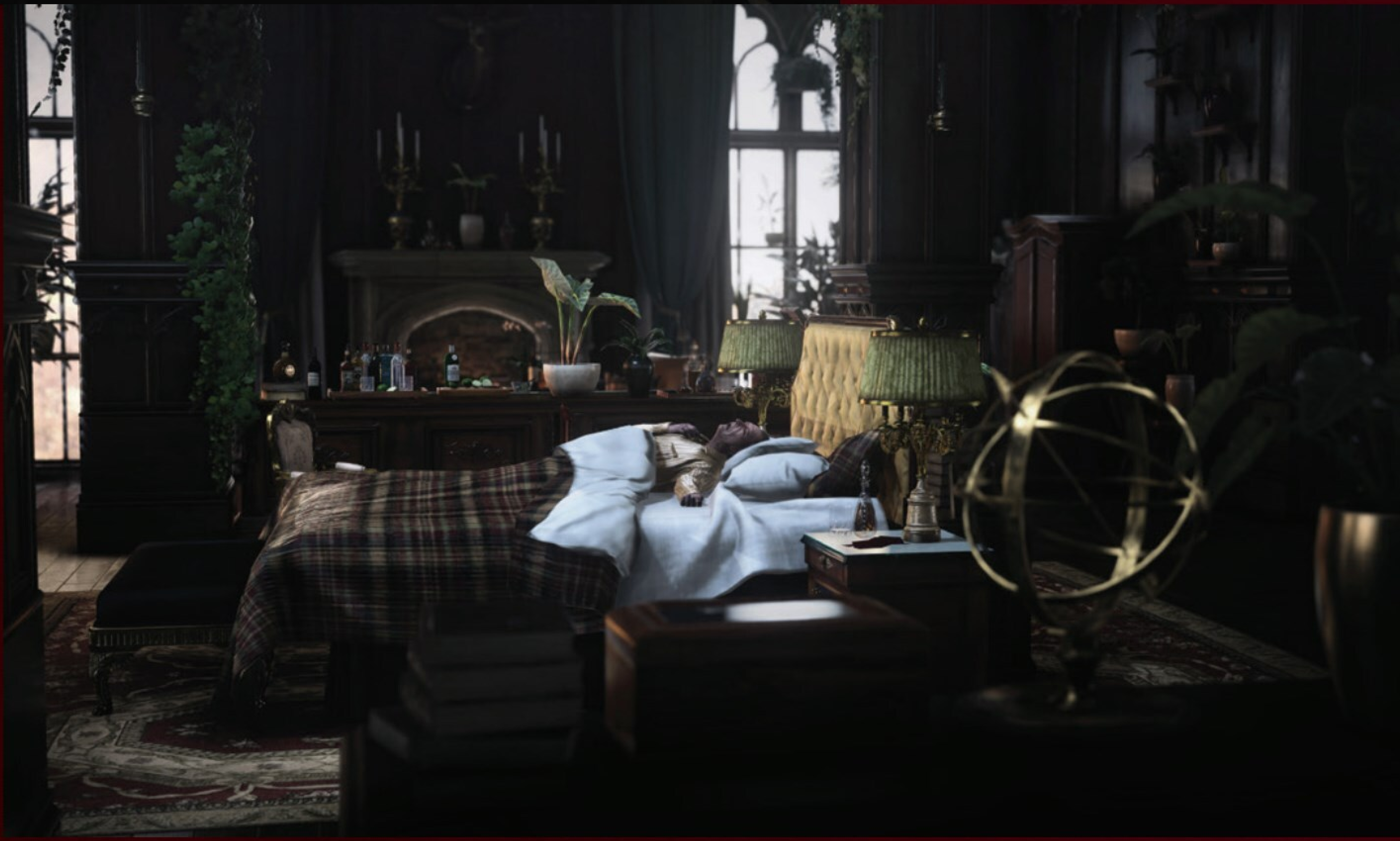
Fernsby restates the importance for discretion for this investigation, saying that there would be consequences if word got out that Alexa Carlisle is still alive. "I'll consider her dead when I leave," Agent 47 responds. He leads me to the crime scene, and I'm able to soak in the manor along the way. It's not a bright space, but it's cozy nonetheless. Dark wood and brass dominate the décor, and family portraits and other works of art line the walls. Ornate carpets muffle footsteps in the halls, and you can practically smell the pipe tobacco through the screen.

I ask if, because the artists on the Hitman games are working on half a dozen or so environments in each entry rather than a fully open world, they have more time to hone their craft while working on smaller, more intricate levels. Swartout Large says "No," professing a teasing admiration to their incredible attention to detail. "They're just really, really good," she says. "They're so skilled and so fast, and they are brave. They just plow in – and it's really annoying, actually, because they're always finding ways to make it better and better and better, to the point where I have to say, 'It's good, it's very shippable – I thought it was shippable four months ago.' [laughs] But it's part of the craft, the passion for quality." She says that one of her biggest challenges has been getting artists and other developers to peel themselves away from whatever it is they're working on at the moment.

I bring what I hope is a fraction of that attention to detail when I enter Zachary's room. Alexa's younger brother is dead in his bed. His room was locked from the inside. I walk around a bit, looking for clues. I find his purported suicide note, which Diana tells me on my earpiece will be handy for comparing to other handwriting samples to rule out other suspects. A nearby laptop shows that he was shopping for rainboots the night he died, which is a little odd. And then there's his body. I scan it with my camera and see the markings on his throat. Agent 47 recognizes the cause of death as poisoning by a plant-based toxin – probably ingested via the whisky on his nightstand. Agent 47, who knows a thing or two about poisoning, places the time of death at around 10 p.m. the previous night.

I look at the room with Agent 47's instinct vision, and I see a highlighted book on a shelf. Pulling it reveals a secret room. Inside, there's a blueprint of the manor with secret passageways, which explains how the culprit may have been able to leave the door locked from the inside. And with that, it seems as though I've seen everything there is to see for now. I talk to Fernsby, and he helpfully adds a list of family members to talk to. According to him, the staff hadn't arrived before Zachary's death, leaving the members of the Carlisle clan as the only possible suspects. Well, them and Fernsby, but who could possibly think the butler had anything to do with this?





CRACKING THE CASE

Now that I'm fully briefed on the situation, I'm able to fully explore the manor and its surrounding grounds. There are two notable exceptions: Alexa's office is off limits, and so is a small room for the security detail – but everything else is a go. It's a strangely liberating feeling for a Hitman game, walking around freely without having to worry about being detected. It takes me a while to get over the urge to crouch around every guard I see.

"If we wanted to do this properly, we really needed to lean into this murder mystery and let that disguise allow you to pretty much go anywhere," Engström says. "And that's fine. I don't think a Hitman game needs to be hard or a level needs to be hard in order to be fun. That's not needed, and I think we prove that quite well in England."

Indeed, solving the mystery isn't challenging per se, but it's incredibly rewarding and interesting. I find members of the Carlisle family throughout the manor, and I interact with them to learn what they thought of Zachary, what they were up to the previous night, and if they'd heard or seen anything unusual. As these questionings are completed, the findings are summarized in my intel log. And as I gather clues or evidence that rules someone out or corroborates another person's alibi, that information is added, too.

The team ultimately decided on having one definitive culprit behind Zachary's poisoning, but the mystery is designed to reward perceptive players with additional information and context, even if they know the murderer's identity. "There's replayability, because you need to play it many times to really understand how everything connects," Engström says.

"The main writer on this mission, Christel Cecilie Graabæk, had this large corkboard with hundreds of tiny little Post-its connected by strings and pins, and it was just amazing to see this corkboard evolve over the course of the year," Swartout Large says. "It's not just the scripting. It's the writing and the art and the sound. I wish we'd done a time-lapse or the making-of, because it was quite spectacular to watch it from the side."

I played through the scenario several times, and I discovered some new secret or interesting facet to the case each time. For example, Edward Carlisle is a bit of a neurotic who's busy writing the eulogy for his mother's funeral and bracing himself for the inevitable critique that she'll provide afterward. Most of the time, I'd catch him as he was preparing the speech. Once, however, I saw him standing by a window, where he left a phone message to someone I can only presume was either his therapist or mistress. Either way, I felt a little sorry for whoever was on the other end of that call.

If you stick around, you can watch the young playboy Patrick Carlisle talk up one of the servants, saying she could be a model and that he has connections in that world if she is interested. Or, you can spy on people you just questioned and listen to them talk about your presence. Some of this is just background info to flesh out the cast, while other bits provide leads or things to pursue on your mission to solve the crime.

When you have enough evidence, you can present it to Alexa. Once again, I won't spoil the outcome, because it's pretty great. In addition to calling out the correct culprit, it's possible to get evidence that leads in another, incorrect direction. Or you could purposefully gather all of the evidence and make a convincing frame job, if you want to sow chaos. Ultimately, play your cards right and you can get the case file on Arthur Edwards, take care of (ahem) business, and stroll right out of the place.

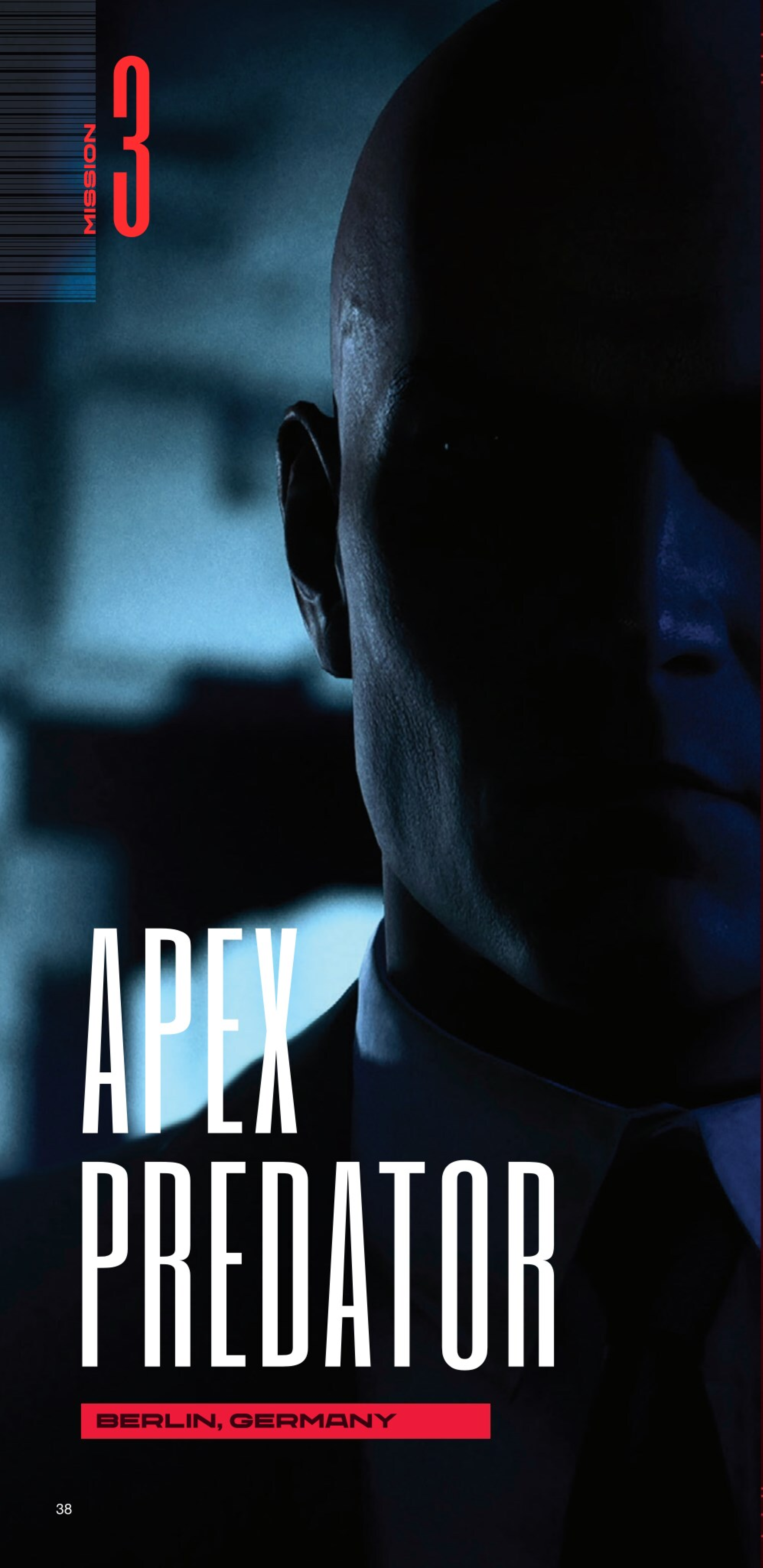
This being a Hitman game and all, this murder mystery is just one of the ways you can take out your target. I wandered into another structured narrative loop that involved posing as a photographer and taking a group shot of the Carlisles. It culminates in one of the funniest moments in the series, which is the closest I've seen it come to pure slapstick. Before that moment happened, Alexa told the family she had to share some information with the group after the portrait session – giving players who want to squeeze every drop of story from the game yet another reason to come back for more.

And yes, members of the team are aware of *Knives Out*, Rian Johnson's 2019 murder mystery. "I think a bunch of us went to see *Knives Out*," Engström says. "Awesome movie, by the way. But [Dartmoor] was not because of the movie, because we worked on it for some time before it came out. But I think there's a baseball in there, which is a small reference to that movie that you can find somewhere."

JAMES BOND?

We are clearly excited about Hitman 3, but IO Interactive recently announced a completely different new project: an all-new James Bond 007 game. We asked IOI's CEO, Hakan Abrak, what he could share about this upcoming title.

"Not much," he says, laughing. "I think we'll wait for that. It's so fresh. We'll wait talking specifically about that until a bit later. But I can say that Hitman means so much to us. Hitman and IO Interactive are very, very closely knit, obviously. But I think, moving forward, IOI should not necessarily be mentioned as 'The Hitman studio IO Interactive,' but first and foremost, people should think about IO Interactive as IO Interactive first, creators of different IPs and a place of creativity where Hitman is definitely one of our children, but there are going to be more children in the future. And one of them is 007. Without being too specific, I can only say that we are extremely excited about this. It's a great opportunity, and I think we're working on something very special."



MISSION 3

APEX PREDATOR

BERLIN, GERMANY

Hitman 3's third mission is where the trilogy begins to roll toward its inexorable conclusion, and as such I don't want to give too much away. IOI is understandably cautious about spoilers, and after seeing where the story appears to be heading, I completely understand. With that in mind, I won't go into why you're in Germany. I won't even tell you anything about the targets. This is the culmination of years of Hitman storytelling and lore-building since the 2016 game (and far beyond, actually), and it's something that is, without question, best experienced first-hand.

That all said, I need to talk about Berlin – or as much as I'm able to right now.

Emerging from a wooded area, I see the telltale cooling towers of a nuclear power plant. It's a place that generates large amounts of energy, though as I get even closer, I see it's not relying on fission. The site has been repurposed, and getting inside isn't going to be easy. Even if I was on the guest list, there's a line that winds its way several hundred feet beyond the entrance.

On the side of the building, I hear a man talking on the phone about how his bike had been moved, along with his stash of "allergy" medication that he needs for his "allergies." That's a possible way inside, as is a doorway that is locked from the other side. Hitman 3 is taking one small cue from the Souls-like games: Players can make their lives easier in future playthroughs by accessing doors and alternate paths to create shortcuts.

"Some doors in Hitman 3, you cannot open them no matter what from one direction, but then when you open them they stay open forever," Engström says. "That's sort of a tactile, more hands-on way to master a mission. I opened a door, I did something in a mission. We wanted to give players a more tactile feeling."

For now, I'll have to be content with jumping a fence and sneaking around, and I'm able to appreciate the location's size. It's truly a massive area, and it feels like the culmination of everything the team has built with its Hitman trilogy.

"The first time I played it in its content-complete state, I cried with happiness. It was game development at its best,'" Swartout Large says.

Berlin marks a turning point for Agent 47's journey, and that's about all we can say right now

END OF AN ERA

Hitman 3 naturally concludes the World of Assassination trilogy that IO Interactive began in 2016. It's been a long journey for the series, as well as for the people who have worked on it over the years. Over the course of conversations with some of the people behind it, it's obvious how important the franchise is to the team and to IOI more broadly speaking. And saying goodbye – at least for now – appears to be a bittersweet experience.

Christian Elverdam, IOI's co-owner and chief creative officer, worked on Hitman: Absolution and directed Hitman 2016. He recalls having conversations with lead writer Michael Vogt several years before the trilogy launched about the story they were hoping to tell. "We didn't plan exactly how it would go – that's not how creativity works," Elverdam says. "But if you look back at the notes we have scribbled down from then, they are very much true today. In that sense, it feels like it ended exactly how we wanted, not exactly how we would have predicted. That feels extremely, extremely good."

Looking back, Elverdam says the studio faced its share of skepticism over the first entry's episodic model, with some players wondering if it was all a big scam. The idea of a largely single-player project that builds on itself over several installments remains an unusual concept today. Other experimental concepts, such as elusive targets that were only available for a certain period of time – with players only getting one attempt to succeed or fail at eliminating – further cemented IOI's willingness to take chances and push the form. And now, we're reaching the end of the journey.

"It's a real honor," says Swartout Large. "It's a real privilege to be a part of this closure together with the rest of the studio and the team. Part of that hand-crafted nature means that people leave their mark. When I'm playing something or when I'm watching Mattias [Engström] play something, I can just tell who did that. I can tell which artist did that, I can tell which sound designer did that, I can tell which level designer was a part of that just from the pacing or the feel or the tone. I think for me, the nostalgia is not so much about the game being done, because it will live and it will be live and people will play it. It's more about the privilege of getting to make the third iteration with this group of extremely talented, really excellent people who just care so much about their work. It's been an incredible journey."

"I think we will miss it, for sure," Engström adds. "I think it's going to be something we talk about for years to come. How awesome it was. Even though we're going to work on awesome stuff in the future, it's going to be so much fun to talk about all the things we did and didn't do and what went wrong and what went right. When I explain to someone what the game's about, you need to talk about it a bit. […] It's a snowflake, a pretty unique game, I have to say."

For more exclusive information about Hitman 3, including our Rapid Fire video interview, visit our hub page at www.gameinformer.com/hitman3

THE TOP

10 GAMES OF

Even in the face of global hardship that created unforeseen challenges for game creators across the world, 2020 remained a remarkable year for new releases. We saw games explore new and innovative directions, connecting us to unforgettable worlds, times, and characters. We experienced the pinnacle of the previous hardware generation's capabilities, and got an early glimpse at what comes next with the debut of new-gen platforms. Amid this impressive variety of engaging games, some have risen above with an exceptional mix of artistry, technical excellence, and pure fun. We've selected and ranked our picks for the 10 best releases of the year, along with details on why each and every one of them is worth your time.

Other games, characters, and gaming companies captured our attention for the way they outshone everything else in their category this year. To read our individual and genre awards for the best and brightest, jump ahead to p. 52. Finally, to get additional insight into the personalized selections from our editorial team, you can read our editors' personal Top 10 lists on p. 64.

#10

IMMORTALS FENYX RISING

What do you get when the team that made Assassin's Creed Odyssey creates a game inspired by The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Portal, and movies like *The Princess Bride* and *The Naked Gun*? The answer is Immortals Fenyx Rising, a lighthearted adventure steeped in Greek mythology, full of endearing characters, epic encounters, and creative puzzles.

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises of the year, Immortals Fenyx Rising sees one of the primary Assassin's Creed studios, Ubisoft Quebec, stretch its wings and soar to exciting heights. No longer bound by the lore and style of Ubisoft's long-running flagship franchise, the studio inserts everything from massive puzzle rooms to humorous, unreliable narrators, all while delivering the same rewarding exploration in a sprawling open world that we've seen in its previous games.

The world itself is gorgeous, drawing visual inspiration from Studio Ghibli's watercolor aesthetic, and exploring it is an utter delight. Around every corner is a mountain to climb, a challenge to rise to, a monster to battle, or a chest to loot.

Immortals Fenyx Rising may take inspiration from many different sources, but the result feels far from derivative. Greater than the sum of its parts, Immortals Fenyx Rising masterfully walks the tightrope of providing something familiar, yet wholly new. Its narrative stylings bring tense moments and exciting action while expertly weaving in an offbeat sense of humor.

By combining these seemingly disparate elements into a cohesive and enthralling open-world experience, Ubisoft successfully created yet another fun action franchise. With so many reasons to continue exploring, we couldn't stop ourselves from diving back in to scour every corner of the Golden Isle for missions to complete, monsters to slay, and puzzles to solve.

#9

FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

With its remake of Final Fantasy VII, Square Enix pulled off a seemingly impossible feat: It put a fresh spin on the classic story and characters, all while completely reinventing the gameplay for modern audiences. The result is an adventure that taps into Final Fantasy VII's deep well of nostalgia, but still offers plenty of delightful surprises for old and new players alike.

Cloud and his mercenary friends still fight against the evil Shinra corporation, but the world has been beautifully reconstructed to give the characters and environments new life. From your battle in a ruined church to your first haunting glimpse of Sephiroth, Final Fantasy VII Remake recreates the important events that fans remember, but adds enough new content to make the story and gameplay feel fresh.

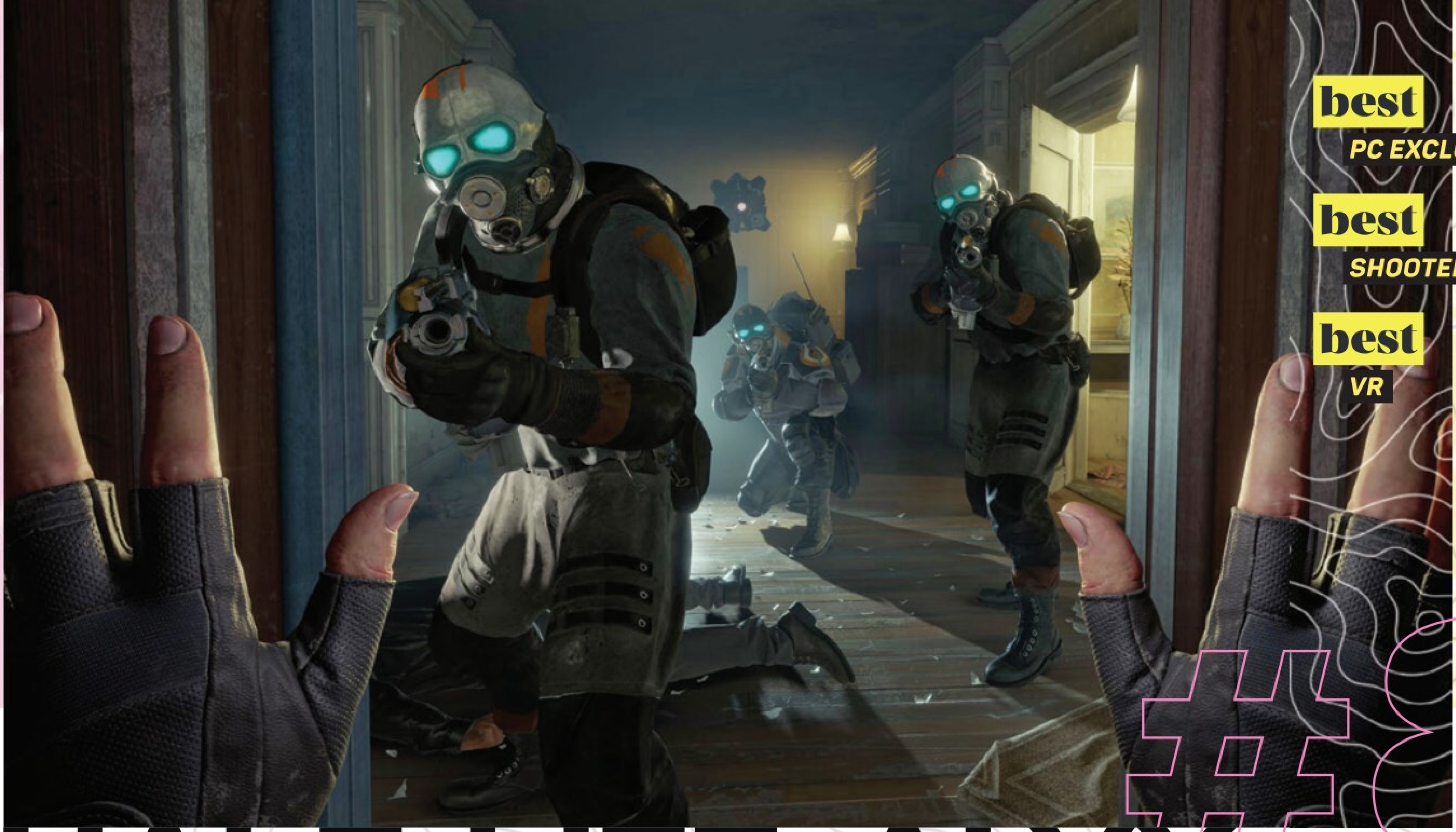
best
REMADE GAME

best
SOUNDTRACK

The highlight of the new elements is the battle system, which the team at Square Enix has brilliantly reimagined by trading the turn-based model for a real-time approach. Through careful use of commands and switching control between your party members, combat becomes a fun fusion of aggression and strategy. This versatile system also highlights each character's strengths; Tifa's melee brawling feels different from Aerith's ranged attacks, so fights are not about repeating the same routine.

Amid the additions and changes, plenty of classic touchstones remain. Memorable scenes, iconic summons, and a rewarding materia-based progression system all feel familiar despite their new incarnations. The soundtrack also deserves a special mention, with wonderful new versions of recognizable songs that strike a remarkable balance between Final Fantasy VII's past and its present.

This remake is only the first part of a planned series, and follows the Midgar section of the original plot – a fraction of Final Fantasy VII's larger tale. How the story and systems will evolve going forward is a mystery, but no matter how future installments shape up, this first entry is an amazing accomplishment that no RPG fan should miss.



best PC EXCLUSIVE

best SHOOTER

best VR

#8

HALF-LIFE: ALYX

Valve has left Half-Life fans in the lurch for nearly 13 years; the cliffhanger ending of Half-Life 2: Episode Two in 2007 set up an epic confrontation that still hasn't been fully resolved. After all that time, we wondered if Valve had forgotten what made Half-Life special in the first place, but once you explore the virtual world of Half-Life: Alyx, it's clear that Valve hasn't lost its magic touch.

On one level, it is a shame that only fans with a VR setup can experience Valve's newest project. On the other hand, Valve's use of virtual reality is so smart that we can't imagine playing Half-Life: Alyx on a flat monitor. Simple tasks like picking up an empty can or reloading a gun are more thrilling in VR, and firefights with Combine troops are more harrowing since you can now physically duck and weave among cover. Between these firefights, Half-Life: Alyx maintains its pace by delivering a series of compelling environmental puzzles and exploration challenges that ask you to thoughtfully observe your surroundings.

Half-Life: Alyx's sense of atmosphere is extraordinary. As Alyx travels across City 17 on a mission to save her father, she explores abandoned underground subways, derelict zoos, and crumbling upscale hotels. In one moment, a three-legged Strider totters above you, knocking debris loose from a nearby building. In another moment, you're being hunted by a blind monster in an abandoned vodka distillery. Each new environment feels lived-in and full of history in ways that send your mind reeling with wonder.

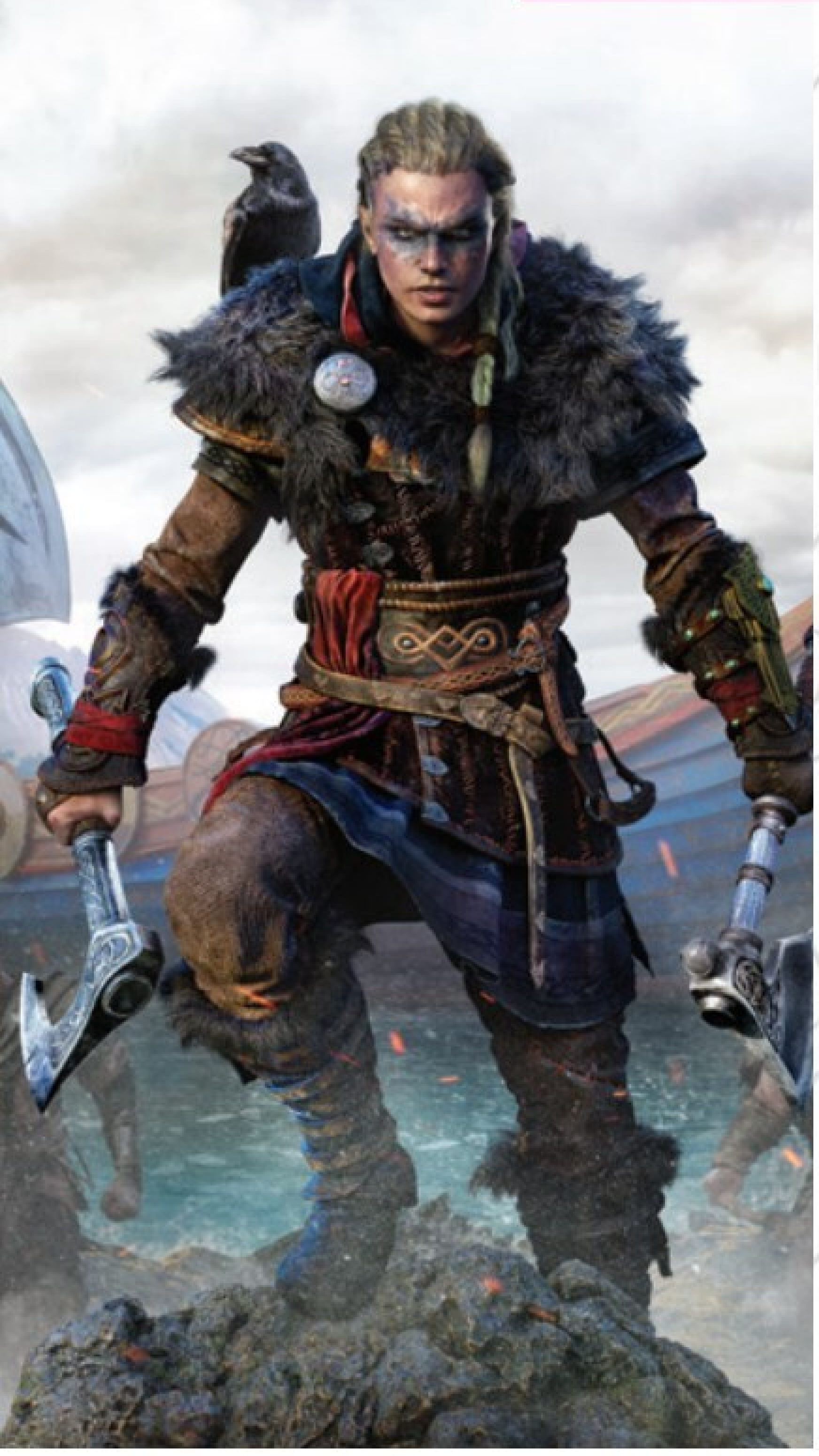
Thanks to the magic of VR, the world of Half-Life has never been more interactive. Many of the environmental puzzles ask you to find new ways to look at your surroundings. Whether you're reaching over a chasm for the flashlight hanging off a corpse, tiptoeing over mines, or tossing bottles across the environment to create a distraction, you feel like you are inside a uniquely responsive world. Thankfully, you are also equipped with a pair of gravity gloves that allow you to snag objects off the floor with the twist of your wrist, and flinging gear across the room had us feeling like a true Jedi master.

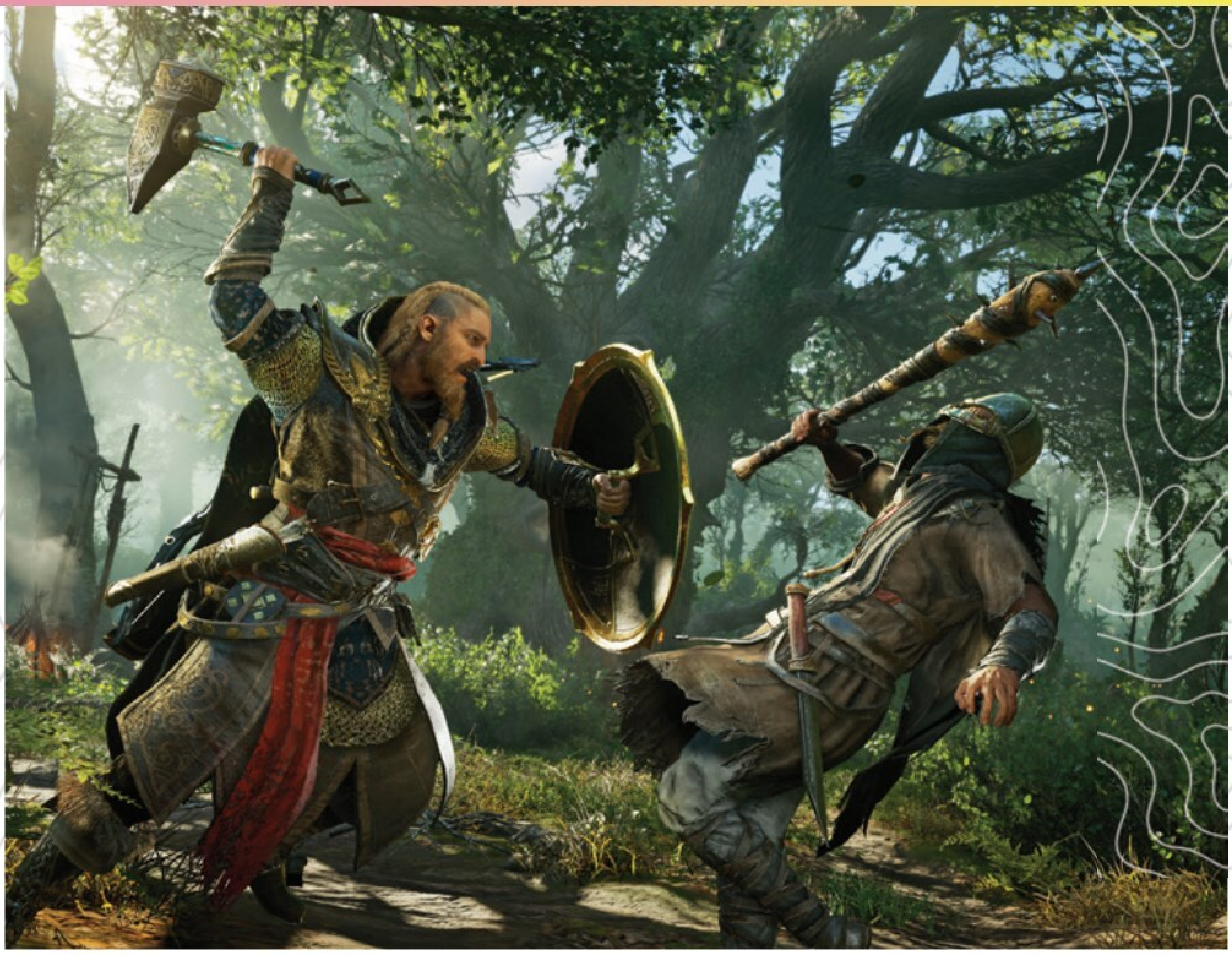
Valve brilliantly balances Alyx's scariest moments with some of the funniest dialogue we heard all year. A resistance member named Russell occasionally comes in over your headset to talk through your mission and offer guidance, and these exchanges are real highlights. Throughout the campaign, Alyx and Russell talk about everything from old-school floppy disks to questionable business plans to club sandwiches, and Valve's clever writing often left us in stitches.

This game is technically a prequel to Half-Life 2, but we wouldn't classify it as a side story since it adds important world-building elements to Half-Life's universe and expands on the series' narrative in some exciting ways. Half-Life: Alyx is a must-play for anyone with a VR headset, not just fans. Like the ending of Half-Life 2: Episode Two, Alyx's phenomenal conclusion is full of promise; we just hope we don't have to wait another 13 years to see that promise fulfilled.

#7

ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA





As a long-running franchise, the Assassin's Creed games all build on the entries before them. However, Assassin's Creed Valhalla doesn't just iterate; this Viking adventure takes all the right lessons from its predecessors while also bringing new twists to Ubisoft's open-world formula, resulting in one of the series' best installments to date.

You take control of Eivor, a Viking leader who must carve out a place for the Raven Clan to settle in 9th-century England.

As you make friends and pursue political alliances in the main story, you also explore a landscape full of fun activities – a big improvement over previous games in terms of variety. Whether you're hunting down treasure chests, solving puzzles, or helping people with their strange (and often funny) problems, the breadth of content ensures that you always having something interesting to pursue. The hardest part is choosing which entertaining task to tackle first.

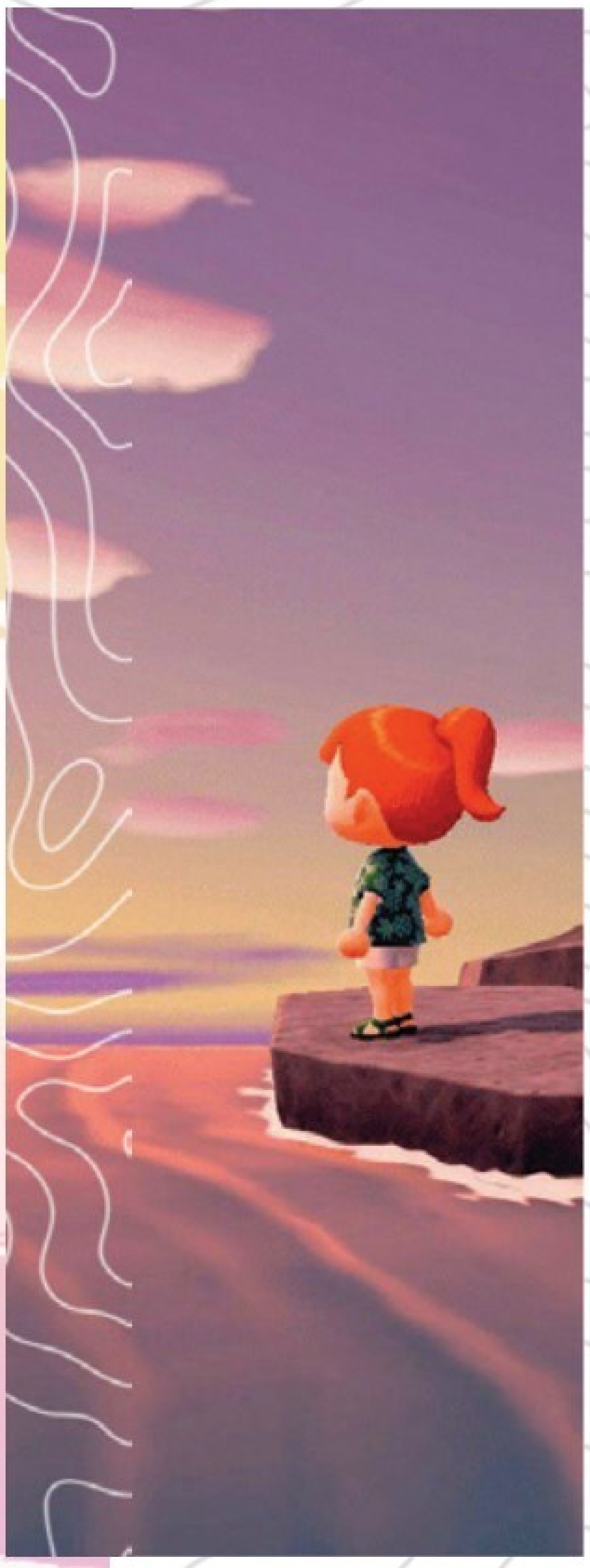
Your exploits feed back into Ravensthorpe, a settlement that you gradually build and upgrade. It serves as your base of operations, but even better, it is a reflection of your achievements. Legendary animals are mounted on the wall as trophies. Allies set up shop to provide help and companionship. Friends give you additional quests to complete. While you may be chasing smaller goals like new gear and upgrade materials when you're out in the world, you're also working toward the larger goal of expanding your home and your clan, and seeing that growth is incredibly satisfying.

In addition to your settlement, a series of interlocking systems keep Valhalla's gameplay engaging. Fully embracing the RPG elements, a sprawling skill tree allows you to shape your playstyle with weapon expertise, contextual actions, and stat boosts. And if you want something more drastic, you can find hidden books while exploring that teach you new combat abilities, like poisoning your weapons or shooting explosive arrows. This creates the most versatile progression in the series, with compelling options for character builds that stretch beyond the stealth, aggressive, and ranged archetypes.

Though some Assassin's Creed games have aimed for elegance in battle, Valhalla highlights the chaos and brutality of war. Raids and fortress assaults emphasize the fact that Eivor does not fight alone, with large clashes between Viking crews and enemy armies. Flying spears, splintering shields, and clanging steel sell the impact of crowded melee conflict – though Eivor is still able to control the mayhem.

Assassin's Creed Valhalla keeps the series' signature mix of exploration and combat, but the team at Ubisoft Montreal incorporates new features and familiar pillars in equal measure. It delivers what fans want from Assassin's Creed, but the steps forward also make it feel like an exciting evolution.

#6 ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS



Animal Crossing: New Horizons, like previous entries in Nintendo's popular simulation series, had always been intended to provide a relaxing escape from reality. After all, nothing says "getaway" like setting up shop on your own private island for all of your fun animal buddies to live on. In an unfortunate and amazing bit of timing, however, New Horizons' arrival became more vital than ever by launching at the brink of COVID-19 lockdowns, giving a now-confined player base the perfect mental distraction. That's not to say that serving as a great coping mechanism is the only reason we love New Horizons so much. Global pandemic or not, it's one of the most charming, entertaining, and engrossing titles of 2020.

Building islands from patches of dirt into your heart's desire, whether that be sprawling villages or carefully crafted tributes to your favorite fandom, is a blast that's only improved thanks to the addition of terraforming. Sculpting majestic waterfalls or chiseling that perfect cliffside has been a dream come true for fans, giving them the tools to shape islands into whatever form they want. Besides giving players increased agency and ownership over their islands, terraforming makes it easy to wipe the slate clean and build from scratch. Inviting friends and strangers over to your island and showing off your hard work and creativity ranks among the most rewarding experiences of the year.

The new Nook Miles system broadens the game's appeal by providing simple, tangible goals to rope in more purpose-driven players. Typically mundane actions like picking fruit, chopping wood, or simply saying "hi" feel more rewarding when Nook Miles are sprinkled on top, which can be used to buy items or travel to other exotic isles. In a similar vein, crafting provides a more engaging method of obtaining new tools and furniture. Sure, it can be annoying to have a shovel break when you need it most, but materials are largely abundant and mashing the crafting button always feels satisfying.

Fun seasonal updates (except for maybe Bunny Day) have made New Horizons the game that keeps on giving, showing no signs of slowing down anytime soon. Enjoyable as it is to compete in fishing tournaments or take wedding photos of smitten alpacas, it's still fun to kick back with the normal, daily loop. Designing clothing patterns, unearthing fossils for Blathers' museum, or playing the Stalk Market all offer a great time. Of course, we'd be remiss not to mention the residents themselves, who remain a joy to hang and shoot the breeze with.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is a wonderful game on its own merits, but it also became one of 2020's most important releases. This year has been hard on many of us, and Tom Nook's wacky island experiment kept a smile on our faces when the world seemed determined to do the opposite. It doesn't matter if you invest several hours each day or only check in once in a blue moon, Animal Crossing: New Horizons is a comforting warm hug and a landmark entry for the series.

best
NINTENDO EXCLUSIVE

best
SIM

best
LEVEL DESIGN

best
MICROSOFT EXCLUSIVE

best
PLATFORMER

ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS

#5

Ori and the Will of the Wisps has some of the best setpieces we've ever played. Unlike the Uncharted or Spider-Man games, where bombastic sequences are basically cutscenes with a few button prompts, Ori never takes you out of the moment, no matter how intense. The game always wants you in control of the action.

Control is what makes this game special. A precise 2D platformer lives and dies by how responsive it feels, and Ori rarely drops the ball in this regard. Exploring its beautiful world, mastering its obstacles, and marveling at its numerous setpieces and boss fights, Ori has some of the tightest gameplay we've ever experienced. It's a game you never want to tear yourself away from; you want to see the next part of the world and best the challenges it contains, all while remaining fully in control of what is happening on screen – whether you're succeeding or failing.

Ori is constantly pushing you as a player. Did you master this challenge? Here's a new one that will break your brain. Feel good about your skill level? Learn to use this new item or suffer the consequences. Think you've got the best of this boss? You probably don't. You're always challenged as a player; you need to learn and adapt as Ori's skillset evolves. When you hit one of the game's numerous big moments, it's like taking the video game equivalent of a final exam.

Ori's chases all unfold the same way: A big monster shows up, and then you run like hell, jumping, dashing, and swinging your way to safety (and probably dying several times in the process). As the behemoth behind you continues its hunt, the world crumbles. Everything feels desperate; your thumbs, like Ori's legs, moving as quickly as possible to escape. You constantly feel the threat of death, but the controls empower you to avoid it. Dying is your fault, but succeeding is your reward for mastering the game.

When setpieces unfold in other games, it's easy to feel detached as you passively watch. In Ori, you control that action, and that control is fantastic. The sense of exhilaration you get from mastering the game's challenges, escaping the monstrosity behind you is a feeling we've rarely felt playing a game before. Ori and the Will of the Wisps is a game that sticks with you, running through your mind after you complete it and asking you to relive its best moments.

YAKUZA: LIKE A DRAGON

#4

In a year where we could all use an extra dose of kindness and lighthearted fun, Yakuza: Like a Dragon delivers in droves. Not only does it debut a new series protagonist with Ichiban Kasuga, but it also transforms the series' action-centric combat into a turn-based RPG with depth beyond throwing your fists around. Battles turn into tense encounters focused on exploiting elemental weaknesses, utilizing buffs/debuffs, and kicking enemies when they're down for extra damage. And, let's not forget summoning in some help from unlikely places like "Poundmates" when things get really dire.

Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio goes all-in with its RPG inspiration, making the main character a diehard Dragon Quest fan and having you help strangers and bond with party members Persona-style. Among the massive list of side activities, there's even a "gotta catch 'em all" system where you collect "Sujimon" for a professor. If that's not enough, you can swap jobs, becoming everything from a break dancer to a chef for entertaining ways to take on the enemy.

The RPG parodies are delightful, but even more impressive is how this entry wonderfully captures the heart and soul of the Yakuza series with a new cast. Ichiban is a loveable goof with a heart of gold, and he possesses the rare ability to see the good in people even in the worst circumstances. Watching him stop at nothing to make things better and become a true hero is a highlight, and Yokohama provides an interesting backdrop to his adventures as you learn more about the criminal underworld. Going off the adventure's beaten path provides memorable side quests that are both hilarious and heartwarming; you never know where a conversation about baby formula may lead.

Ichiban's journey isn't just about silly minigames and outlandish ways to attack baddies, however. At the heart of his tale is intrigue, as you try to piece together why his former father figure betrayed him. The Yakuza series has always focused on choosing your own family, and Ichiban finds it in unlikely places with a blunt homeless man and former police officer with a penchant for spending money on booze and women. One minute Yakuza: Like a Dragon has you chuckling over the absurdity of the situations you get put in; the next, it pulls at your heartstrings as you watch the tender moments between Ichiban and his team of misfits.

best
RPG

best
ART DIRECTION

best
DLC

#3 GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

Audiences finally got the open-world samurai game they longed for this year, thanks to Sucker Punch Productions and its stellar Ghost of Tsushima. It skillfully marries stealth action and visceral swordplay, letting players protect Japan from a large-scale Mongol invasion however they see fit. And even though it tells an epic story of love, betrayal, and honor, it's filled with moments of quiet contemplation that let players fully absorb the effects of their actions.

Protagonist Jin Sakai is a young noble torn between acting honorably while up against insurmountable odds. Under the brutal leadership of Khotun Khan, hordes of invaders have slaughtered the protector samurai class and butchered anyone on the island of Tsushima who stands in their way of eventually claiming greater Japan. Sakai's uncle, Lord Shimura, believes the only way to fight back is by doing so the traditional way: battling enemies in face-to-face combat. Once Shimura is captured, Sakai discovers a new path, one based on deception and subterfuge.

Ghost effectively gives players two main ways to approach combat, both of which are equally effective and satisfying. Sakai can hide in the shadows, drawing enemies near and striking before his presence is even known. Or he can stride to an encampment's front gate, boldly challenging the entire group of Mongols to battle. Not only are both options viable, but players aren't discouraged from dabbling in both approaches depending on the situation. At its best, Ghost of Tsushima makes players feel as though they're participating in encounters pulled straight from samurai cinema, with a lone hero facing – and triumphing – over seemingly impossible odds.

These violent and bloody battles take place in a world that is also home to breathtaking beauty. Sucker Punch's art team has built a world that features shockingly vivid color palettes and vistas that demand you stop whatever task you're on to appreciate the visual splendor. Sucker Punch also gives players the option to play in what they call "Kurosawa Mode," which aims to recreate the high-contrast black-and-white of Akira Kurosawa's mid-20th century samurai movies. It not only adds film grain and other visual artifacts, but it compresses the soundscape to fully suit the era. In short, it's much more than a simple color-palette swap, showing once again the passion and dedication to vision that Sucker Punch brought to the project.

While it was designed to be a robust single-player experience, Sucker Punch added multiplayer via a free post-launch update. Here, players can take on new story challenges with a friend, or team up in larger horde-mode style battles against the Mongol armies with up to four combatants – each with their own special skills and abilities. It's a great bonus for players who understandably want to spend as much time in this gorgeous (and brutal) world as possible. And who could blame them? Ghost of Tsushima is one of 2020's best games.

HADES

#2

best COMBAT

best ROGUELIKE

From its roots with the constantly narrated storybook experience in Bastion to the futuristic experimentation in Transistor and the wild world of sports with Pyre, Supergiant Games doesn't attempt to catch the same lightning in a bottle twice. With Hades, the lightning is a veritable superstorm of epic proportions, a roguelike hack-and-slash that transcends the genre with story, style, and speed. Tapping into Greek myth for inspiration, the tale of Zagreus and his escape from the bowels of Hades takes place over many attempts. But this isn't a game solely for lovers of procedurally generated dungeon rooms, random powerups, and discovering overpowered combinations of weapons and abilities. If one word can convey what makes Hades one of the best games of 2020, it's cohesion.

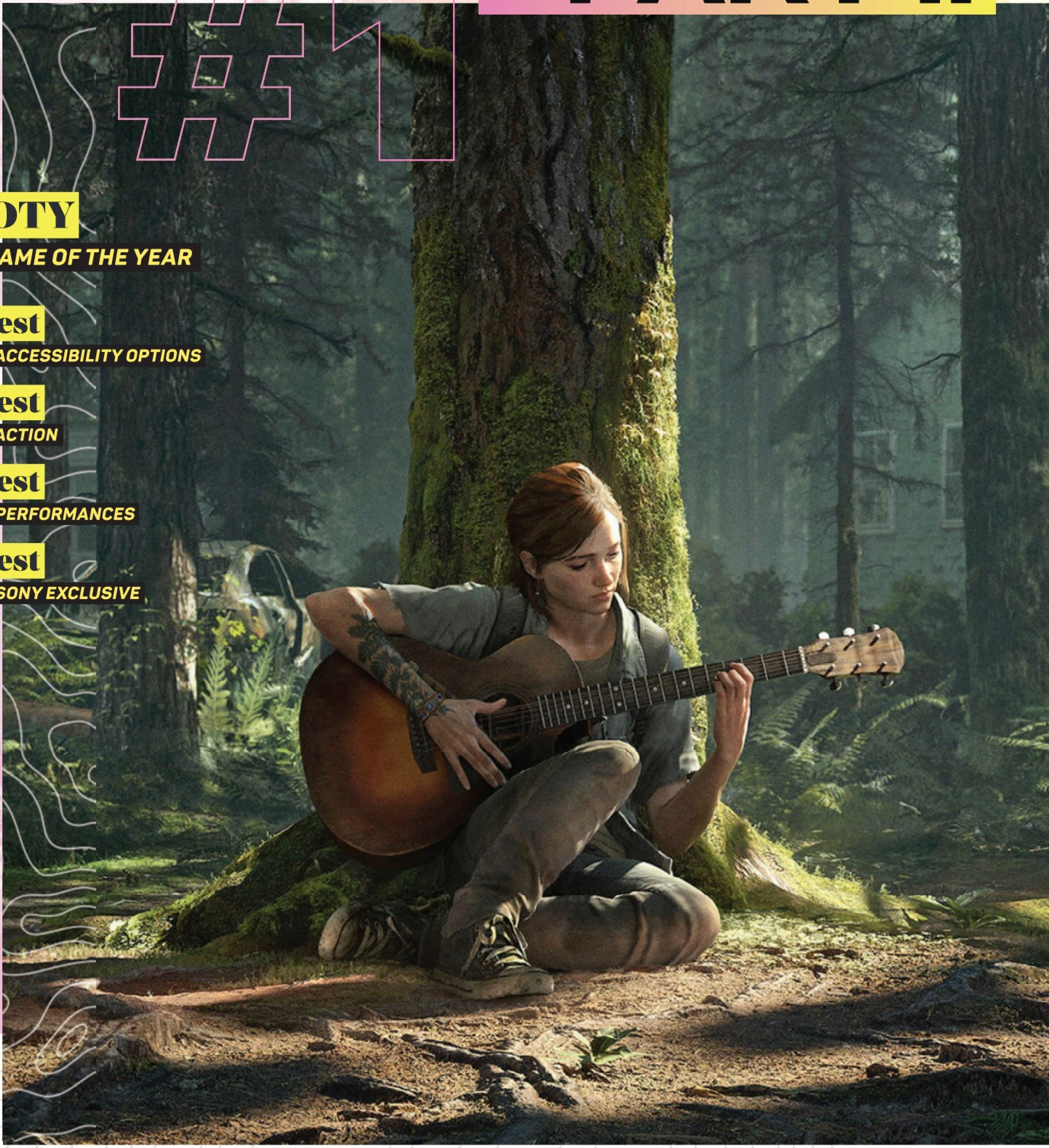
Every aspect of Hades feels like it was seamlessly crafted, leading to a compelling gameplay flow enhanced by admirable aesthetics, brilliant voice acting, and immersive music. Giant, sprawling games are often incredible tapestries woven by many entities, yet Hades somehow seems like all the various components of the game came from the same place, syncing up and synergizing in laudable fashion. When Zagreus enters a room with a bold quip and the music amps up, you know it's time to smash your way out of the underworld with a sword, gauntlet, or gun.

Various weapons and powerups aid you on your journey out of the depths, and depending on the run and player choice, the functionality of the template weapon can be drastically different every time. Many roguelikes offer interesting choices, but every jaunt out into the dungeon takes you deeper into the story. Whether you're forging new relationships with the gods or other characters, the pacing is such that you continue to unearth new narrative gems even on your 100th excursion. Extensive contextual dialogue for a multitude of characters and events shapes the world around you, raising Hades above its often gameplay-centric peers. While Hades' gameplay is top notch as well, with frenzied dodging, diving, and slashing, the overarching use of the run structure to tell a worthwhile tale creates an even more immersive loop. From your first use of a chaos portal to inject some gambling into your run or fishing up a rare find for the chef back home, even the most minute tasks and exercises feel special.

Progress in Hades comes consistently over time, as resources collected during escape attempts can be used to unlock powerful permanent boosts for Zagreus. If you're unable to handle the obscene amount of projectiles on the screen during a battle or face off against stygian hydras or massive minotaurs, fear not, as you eventually unlock new abilities and tools to help take them down. While Hades features a deep well of customization and variance management that fans of roguelikes will love, it cleverly obfuscates those elements with an intriguing story, curious combinations, and constant discovery.

THE LAST OF US PART II

#1



GOTY
GAME OF THE YEAR

best
ACCESSIBILITY OPTIONS

best
ACTION

best
PERFORMANCES

best
SONY EXCLUSIVE

Considering the powerful finale of the original The Last of Us, many players questioned whether Joel and Ellie's story even needed a sequel. After reaching such unprecedented heights, some people assumed developer Naughty Dog had nowhere to go but down. That assumption was wrong; The Last of Us Part II climbs even higher than the original, pushing boundaries and defying expectations to create an unforgettable and heartwrenching look at the things people do in the name of love.

From the emotional story to the immersive world, The Last of Us Part II is astounding on every level. It picks up five years after the original, with Ellie and Joel settled into a relatively harmonious existence. They live in a commune among family and new friends, attending parties, going on patrols, and surviving in a world still ravaged by the deadly Cordyceps virus. But despite the legions of infected, humans remain an even more dangerous enemy. We won't spoil any specifics here, but a tragic event upsets Ellie's new life and sends her on a quest for vengeance.

Revenge stories are common in all kinds of media, but The Last of Us Part II differentiates itself in how it leverages players' familiarity with Ellie; the young, joke-loving girl from the first game has transformed into an almost unrecognizable storm of recklessness and violence. She sneaks through Seattle and hunts down the people responsible with brutal efficiency. The game asks you to perform actions as Ellie that can be uncomfortable and infuriating, which is all the more effective because of how much it makes you care about her as a character. Even if you don't agree with all of her choices, Naughty Dog skillfully helps you understand them in the context of Ellie's grief.

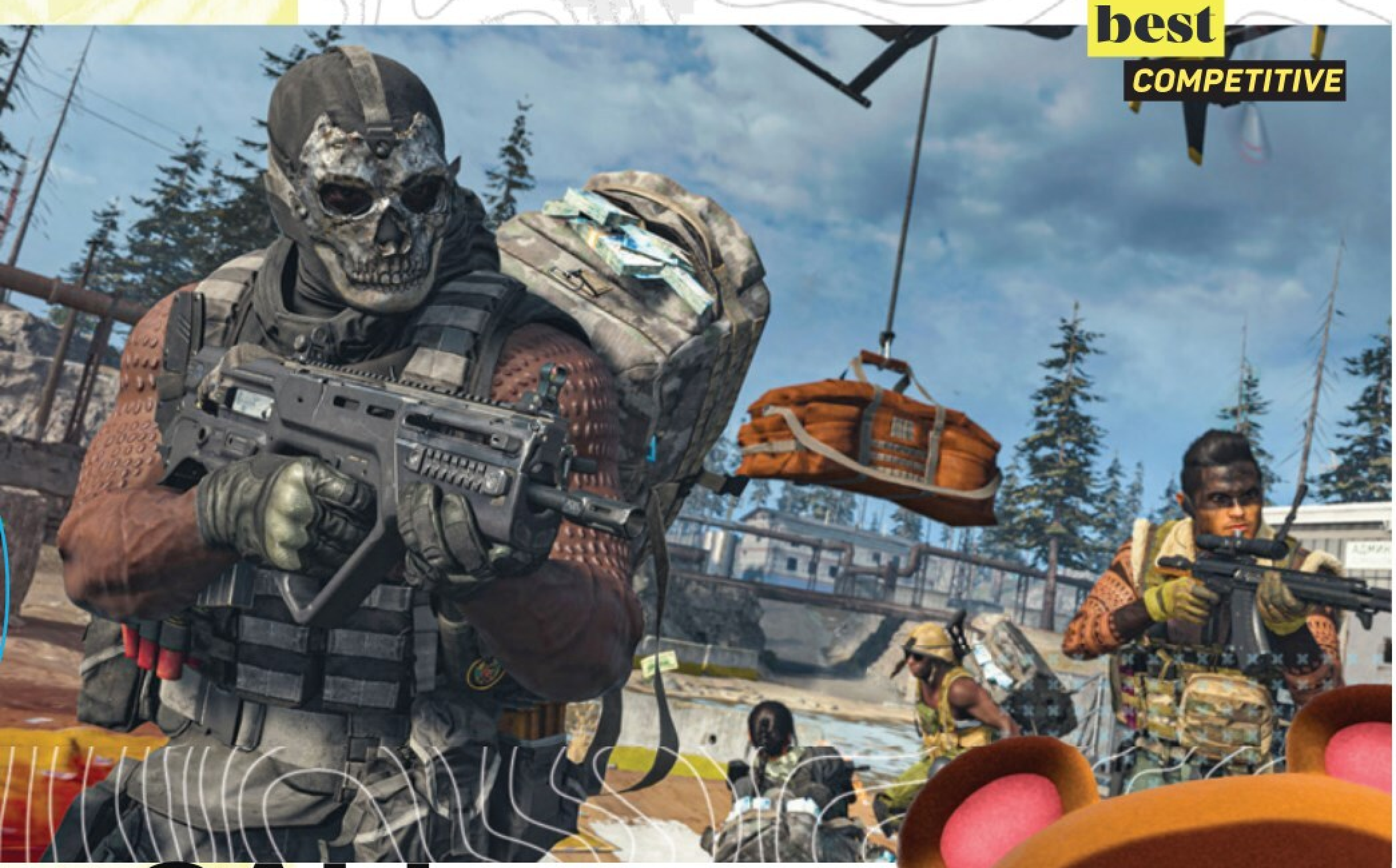
You can scout areas and take down foes quietly, conserving ammunition for unavoidable encounters full of armed soldiers and horrifying monsters. This immersive mix of combat and stealth creates an exciting push-and-pull that takes you through high-stress pockets of action, then gives you time to breathe and regroup. The downtime also allows you to absorb the artistry of the environments; the carefully crafted world tells compelling stories through countless little details, including everything from written notes to the arrangement of furniture in a room.

The Last of Us Part II revolves around Ellie's journey, but Naughty Dog also explores its complex themes by asking players to consider events from different perspectives. This adds surprising ambiguity and nuance to a fantastic cast of characters who are brought to life through stellar performances. With bold narrative ambition, intense gameplay, and meticulous technical execution, The Last of Us Part II doesn't only distinguish itself as the best game of 2020; it's one of the defining experiences of the outgoing console generation.

Game Informer's End-Of-Year Awards

THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST OF 2020

In a year unlike any other, we turned to games to bring us escape, social interaction, and respite from the real world. Beyond our selections of the 10 best games of the year, dozens of other titles captured our attention and enthusiasm for the specific ways they brought joy and fun into our lives over the course of 2020. Read on to discover the games, characters, and companies that won awards from us for standout performances in particular categories, as well as personal editor picks for the games that helped define the year for each of us.



best
COMPETITIVE

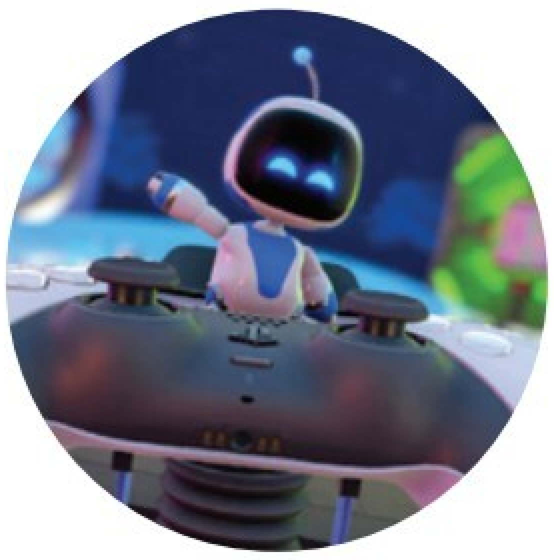
CALL OF DUTY: WARZONE

best
VILLIAN

TOM NOOK

This real-estate maven of Animal Crossing: New Horizons sells you on the dream of building a new life. Then he does nothing but force you to do all the work in bringing the island to greatness while charging you every step of the way. He's the capitalist you love to hate, constantly reminding you that hospitality comes at a price and you still owe him on your loan.

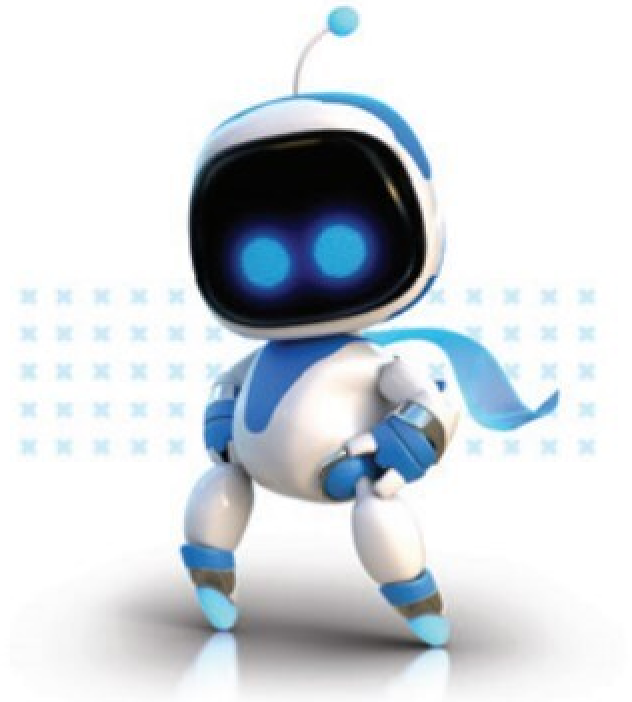
editor pick



Astro's Playroom

Since Astro's Playroom comes pre-installed on every PS5, my expectations for it were not high. But instead of a perfunctory tour of the console's new features, I was delighted to discover a joyful platformer that combines PlayStation's history and innovation in surprising ways. Beneath the cute aesthetic, Astro's Playroom highlights what new-gen games can exclusively achieve; the DualSense controller's unique haptic feedback adds a new sense of physicality that lets you feel the action, whether you're zipping up in a gorilla suit or skating on the ice. The fun worlds and plentiful collectibles are all wrapped in a joyous celebration of the PlayStation brand and its past, making Astro's Playroom a charming experience on its own, and a wonderful introduction to the PS5.

– Joe Juba



editor pick

Resident Evil 3

Comparing this year's Resident Evil remake to last year's entry is irresistible. It's also unfair. Even though Resident Evil 2 was a better overall experience, Resident Evil 3 shouldn't be overlooked. Capcom's methodically paced action is full of tense moments punctuated by explosive set pieces ... and that's all before the relentless terror that is Nemesis shows up. Capcom's body-bag clad monstrosity dogs you for the duration of your escape from Raccoon City's zombie outbreak, which makes it a total thrill ride. Nemesis is an incredibly formidable foe, and every time he appeared my animal instincts kicked in, and every muscle in my body screamed, "Run!" ***– Ben Reeves*** editor pick

Destiny 2

Bungie continues to prove its willingness to make big changes in the name of long-term health for its living shooter. Even when I find myself frustrated with one or another aspect of the experience, it's the nature of this evolving world that keeps me logging in day in and day out, eager to see what happens next. The gunplay and action remain top-notch, but it's the recent deeper investment in storytelling that gives the Destiny universe that rare combination of breadth and depth, aided by new modes and activities that reinforce the narrative. The latest Beyond Light expansion strips away much of the older game elements. And while I can't help but miss what's gone, the way those losses pave the way to what comes next is tantalizing.

– Matt Miller

best
REMASTER

best
PUBLISHER

SONY

Some racers dominate the entire race, and Sony ran strong the whole year. Standout exclusives like The Last of Us Part II and Ghost of Tsushima proved the publisher's devotion to hobbyists, and the PlayStation 5 launched strong with games like Demon's Souls and Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales, setting the bar for new-gen fun.

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

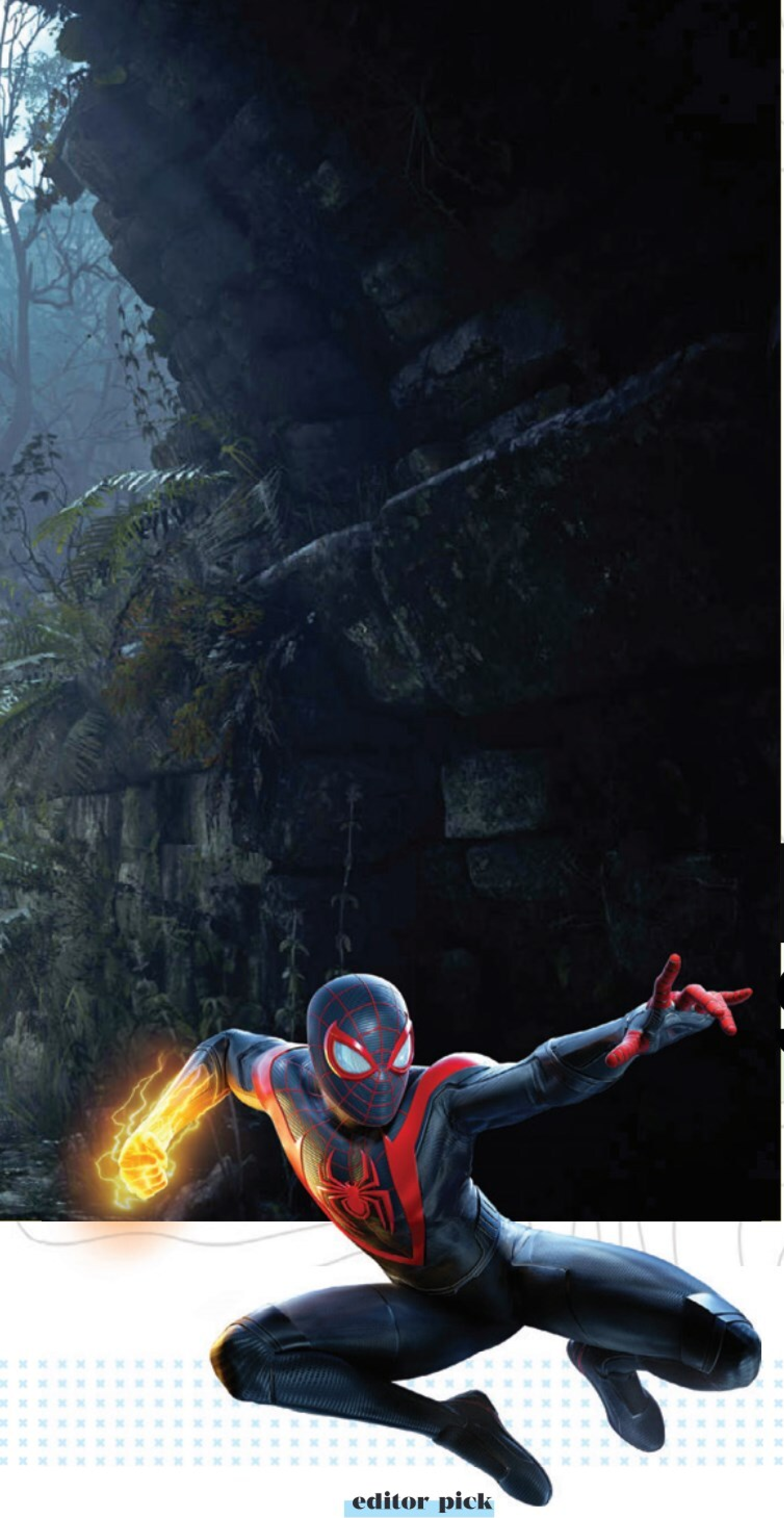
best
INNOVATION

editor pick

Star Wars: Squadrons

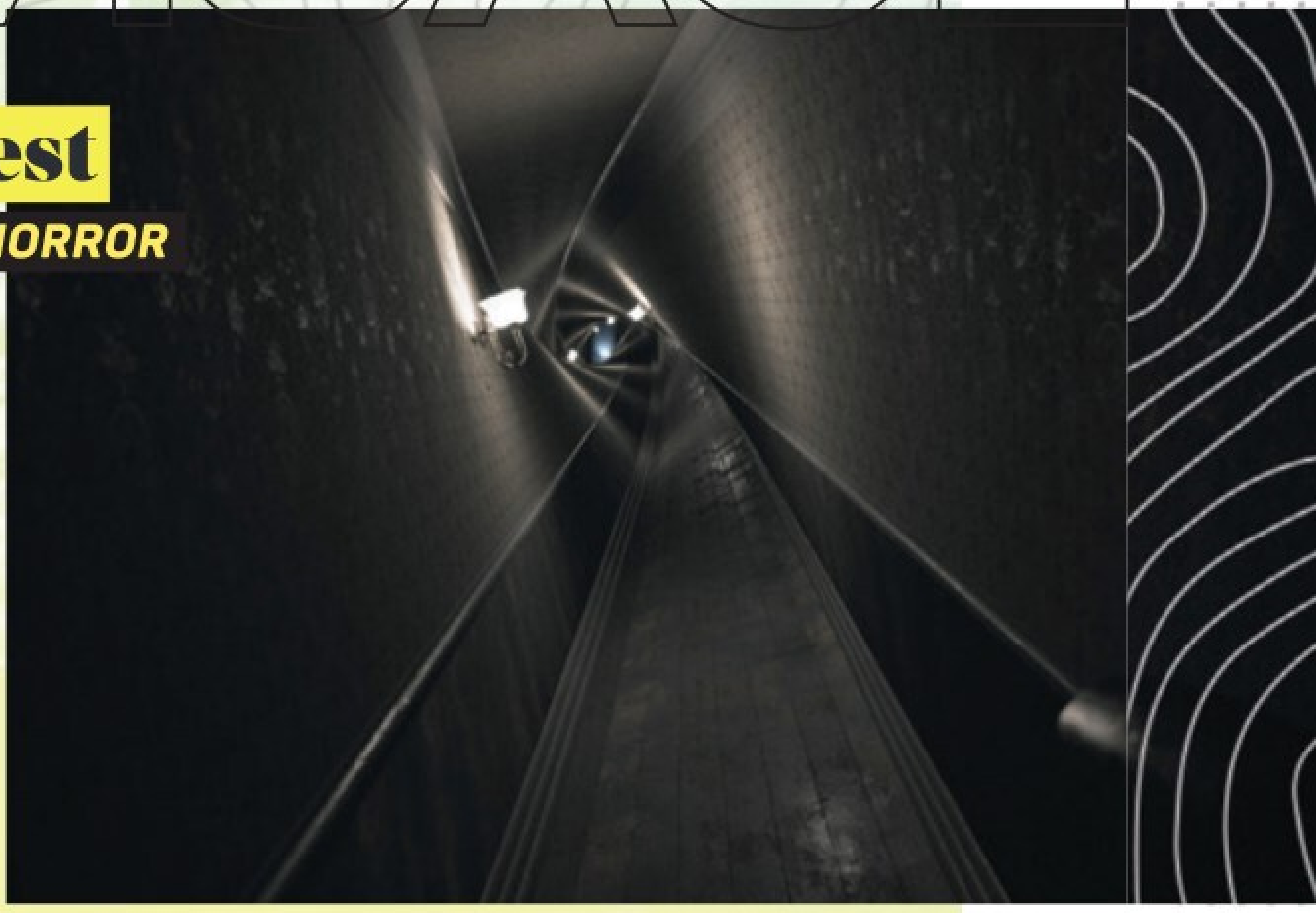
For decades, I've wanted a sequel to X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter. Finally, Electronic Arts and Motive Studios have answered that call with Squadrons, a space-combat experience that highlights the thrills of flying for the Rebellion and Empire. The multiplayer dogfighting is nicely designed, allowing players to duck dangerously into asteroid belts and skim along the surface of Star Destroyers as they pursue a rival starfighter. Squadrons screams of Star Wars excitement and does a tremendous job highlighting an element of this beloved license that has been overlooked for too long.

– Andrew Reiner



VISAGE

best
HORROR



DEMON'S SOULS

editor pick

Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales

Nothing beats visiting a beloved hometown. Grabbing a bacon-egg-and-cheese from that one bodega with the friendly cat, marveling at those old wall murals from your childhood, and swinging by abuela's apartment; the customary bass of reggaeton and hip-hop booming from beyond her kitchen windows. In Marvel's Spider Man: Miles Morales, not only did I get the golden opportunity to relive my Afro-Latino upbringing in Spanish Harlem, I was also given the power to protect the community as a certified superhero. Beyond the bombastic combat and awesome set pieces, Insomniac Games weaves an intricate web of character motivations and central motifs that help solidify Miles Morales as the next great symbol of blackness in video game narratives. *– Jason Guisao*

editor pick

Black Mesa

Even in a year with some truly stellar remakes and remasters, Crowbar Collective's fanmake of the original Half-Life using the Half-Life 2 Source engine left an impression. Valve's original FPS design stands the test of time as you battle tooth and nail to escape a secret government science facility before it's overrun with interdimensional aliens. However, Crowbar Collective re-envisioned Half-Life's environments to feel more modern. Better still, Black Mesa greatly expands on the original game's ending where Gordon Freeman takes the fight to the alien world of Xen, turning an often-forgotten sequence from the Half-Life series into a real gem. *– Ben Reeves*

editor pick

Coffee Talk

Coffee Talk doesn't try to be anything it's not, and that's what makes it perfect. This coffee-brewing adventure is a heart-to-heart experience that became a therapeutic safe haven for me during a massive period of change amidst a global pandemic. A barista journey with a fantasy twist, I found meaningful conversation, interactions, and an avenue of "letting it all out and letting it all go." Just with Coffee Talk I got to do this in a pixelated fashion with vampires, orcs, and everything else you can think of. It's a game about solving peoples' problems, no matter how big or small, and it inspired empathy during a time where many of us felt alone. *– **Liana Ruppert***

BALDUR'S GATE III

best

EARLY ACCESS

MORTAL KOMBAT 11: AFTERMATH

best

FIGHTING

editor pick

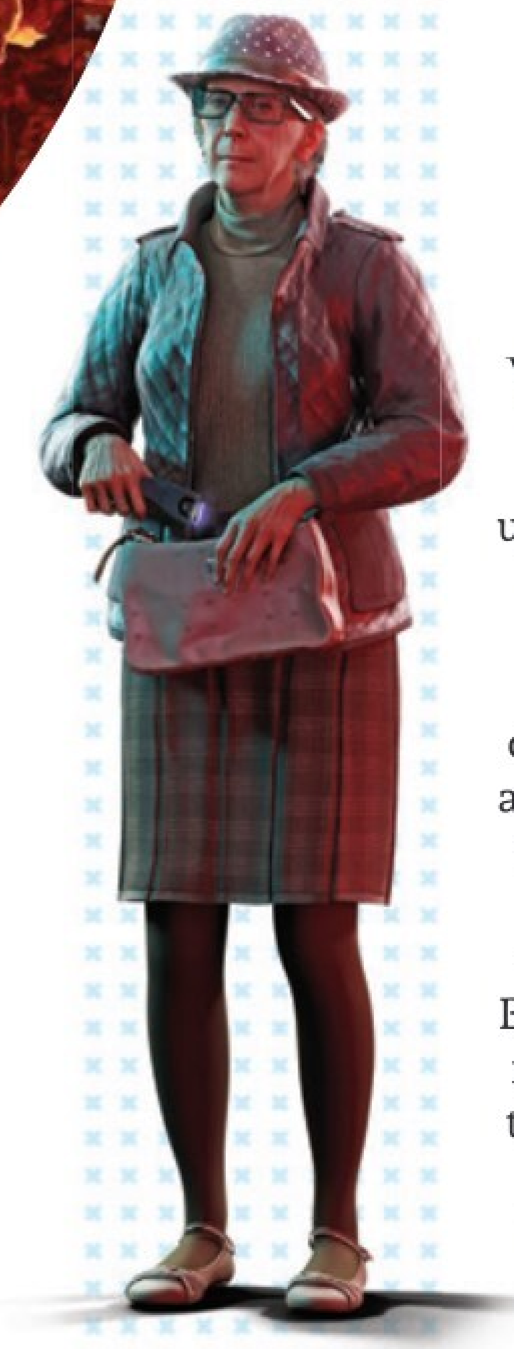
Valorant

Few video games have kept me coming back as frequently as Valorant has this year. Being a fan of team-centric multiplayer titles like Overwatch and Rainbow Six Siege, Riot Games' new competitive first-person shooter quickly captured my interest when it was released in early June. Valorant pits two squads against one another in an attack-and-defend scenario that is enhanced by the game's unique character abilities, a war chest of high-impact weaponry, and an in-game economy which serves as the backbone of it all. If you're interested in learning a new competitive PC game, you can't go wrong with Valorant. *– **Alex Van Aken***

editor pick

Doom Eternal

Doom Eternal doesn't reinvent the wheel, and that's the best thing about it. Doom (2016) is already one of the best games of the last generation, and the ways developer id Software iterates upon and refines what made that game special in Eternal not only make it an exceptional sequel, but a fantastic experience in its own right. It's more Doom, but bigger, bloodier, and more extreme. From visually diverse levels, frenetic combat, and the inclusion of new combat options that vary up the moment-to-moment gameplay (special shoutout to the flame belch), Doom Eternal takes a proven formula and makes it the best it possibly can be. ***– Blake Hester***



editor pick

Watch Dogs: Legion

Watch Dogs: Legion continues the series' upward trajectory by taking a sharp left turn and giving players an entire city's population to command. From secret agents to dominatrices to sweet old grandmothers, controlling London's tech-savvy populace is a fun and often hilarious good time. Much of that is due to the enjoyable mission design, which rewards and encourages experimentation of your crew's unique skill sets. Building a well-oiled machine of a team feels rewarding, and watching prized agents bite the dust (if you're playing with permadeath) can be a surprisingly potent gut punch. Watch Dogs: Legion feels like one of those wacky ideas that was just wild enough to work and, thankfully, absolutely does.

– Marcus Stewart

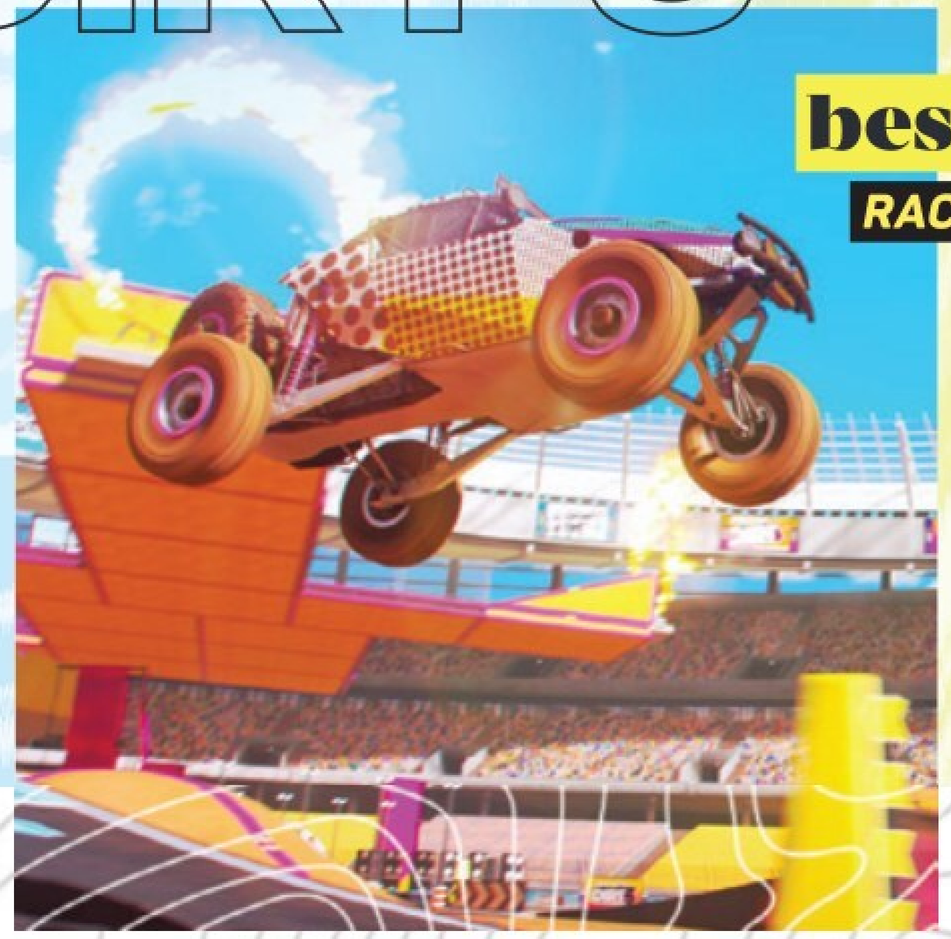
editor pick

Spelunky 2

Spelunky 2 is at once one of the most exciting and most stressful games I've played all year. Sure, you start each run with the best of intentions, but every move you make has the potential for complete and total disaster. That level of mayhem is at times infuriating, but I always hurried back in line to get on the ride again. Starting run after run with (often-misplaced) optimism sounds like a recipe for frustration, but it made every last bit of progress feel rewarding. I often found myself starting up the game with the intention of playing for only a few minutes before my "just one more try" effortlessly escalated into an entire afternoon of captivating chaos and enthralling exploration. Spelunky 2 is a terrific test of skill, mettle, poise, persistence, and luck.

– Brian Shea

DIRT 5



best

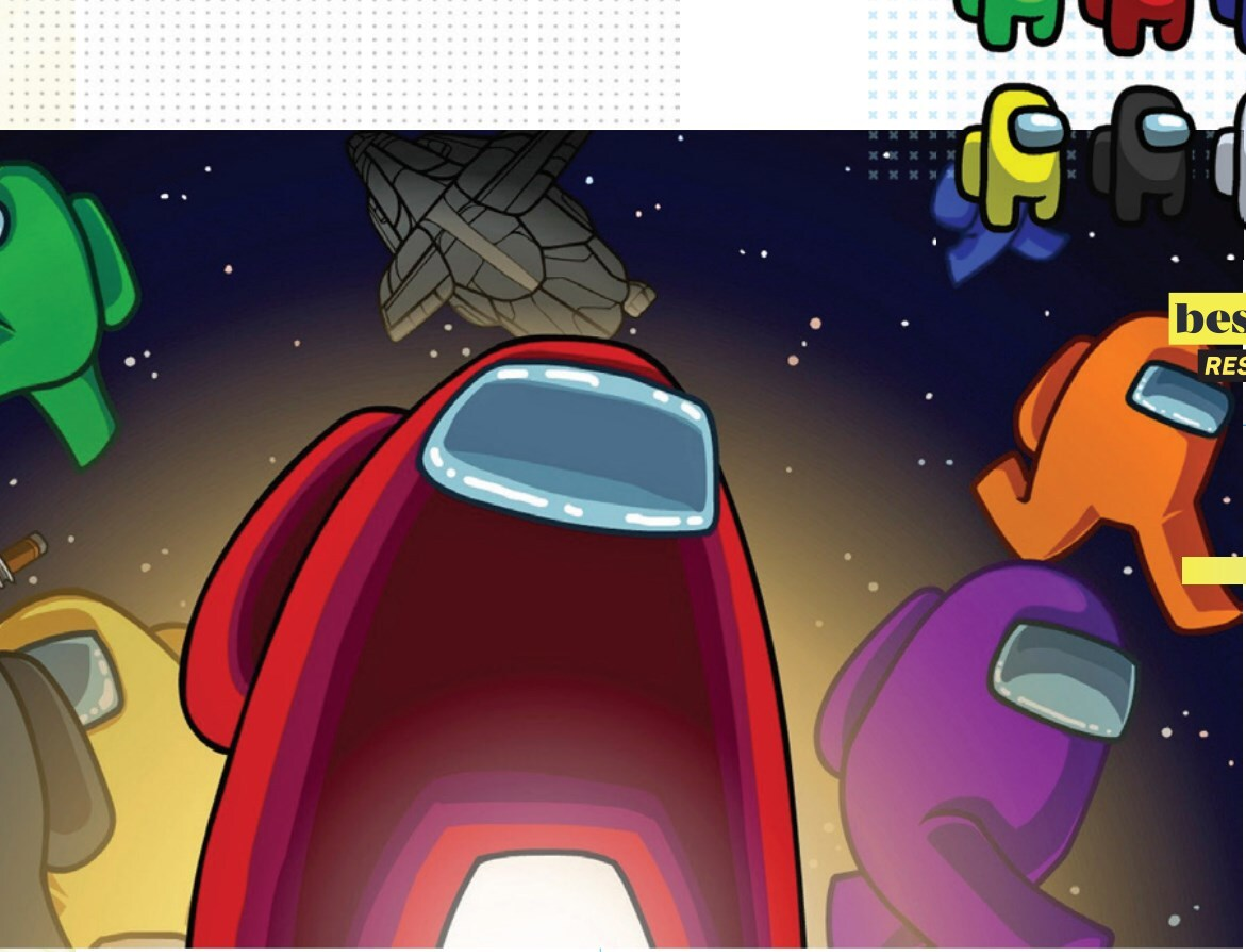
RACING

best

DORK

ICHIBAN KASUGA

Yakuza: Like a Dragon's enthusiastic protagonist with a heart of gold may just be one of the most lovable dorks around. Not only is his failed punch perm a sight to behold, but he also wants to be a hero just like the ones in Dragon Quest games. He even imagines battles as if he were in a JRPG! How can you not root for a man this pure?



best
RESURGENCE

AMONG US

Among Us first released back in 2018, but it didn't get the spotlight it deserved. 2020 gave this game of "sus" little astronaut jelly beans plagued by deceit and intrigue a second lease on life, making Among Us a cultural cornerstone seen everywhere. From the biggest streamers to politicians getting in on the action, everyone is down for a little chaos.

editor pick

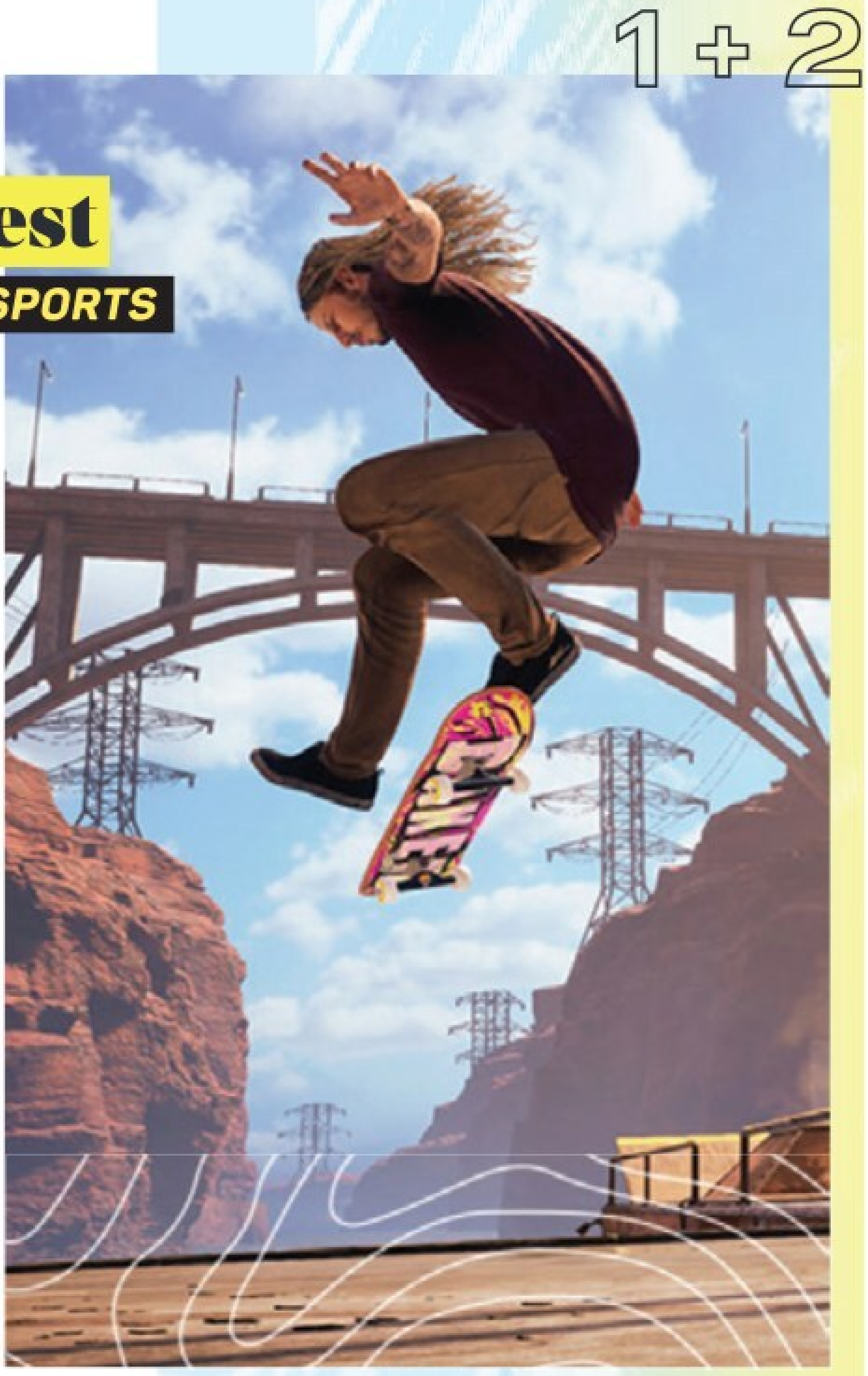
Cyberpunk 2077

Developer CD Projekt Red may be known for its fantasy epics within The Witcher series, but Cyberpunk 2077 takes the studio in a new and ambitious direction. This futuristic RPG transports players to Night City – a dark, tech-obsessed place oozing with excess consumerism and jaded overindulgence. As the customizable protagonist V, I loved the varied and abundant opportunities I had to make my mark on the world. Whether it was deciding where to explore, which abilities to invest in, or even how to style my character, the possibilities always seemed endless. Being challenged to make decisions regarding the ethics of technology and its relationship to human nature made me second-guess myself at every turn. Night City is a place I won't soon forget.

– Kimberley Wallace

TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 1 + 2

best
SPORTS



editor pick

Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout

I have to be honest. Leading up to the release of Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout, I was skeptical the game could pull off its strange-yet-ambitious twist on the battle-royale genre. Mediatonic's multiplayer platformer throws 60 bean-shaped players through the ringer in a variety of physical challenges reminiscent of those featured in game shows like *Wipeout* and *MXC*. Not only has Fall Guys proven me wrong, but its absurdity has made it my new favorite party game for those nights when I want to relax and laugh with friends.

– Alex Van Aken

editor pick

Streets of Rage 4

Innovation is exciting and all, but it turns out that just punching street thugs in the face and eating food off the ground can still provide plenty of thrills. Streets of Rage 4 successfully reminds players of the series' glory days with a beat 'em up that feels like it'd be at home in both 1992 and 2020. A refined combo system and fun new characters Cherry and Floyd add contemporary flair to the classic package. All of that is lovingly wrapped in a sharp comic-book presentation and one of the year's best most bop-worthy soundtracks. Streets of Rage 4 rocks whether you're cleaning up the neighborhood alone or with friends. After 28 years, Streets of Rage 2 has finally been dethroned as the series' best installment.

– Marcus Stewart

best

BEST MUSIC/RHYTHM

FUSER

KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

best

ADVENTURE

editor pick

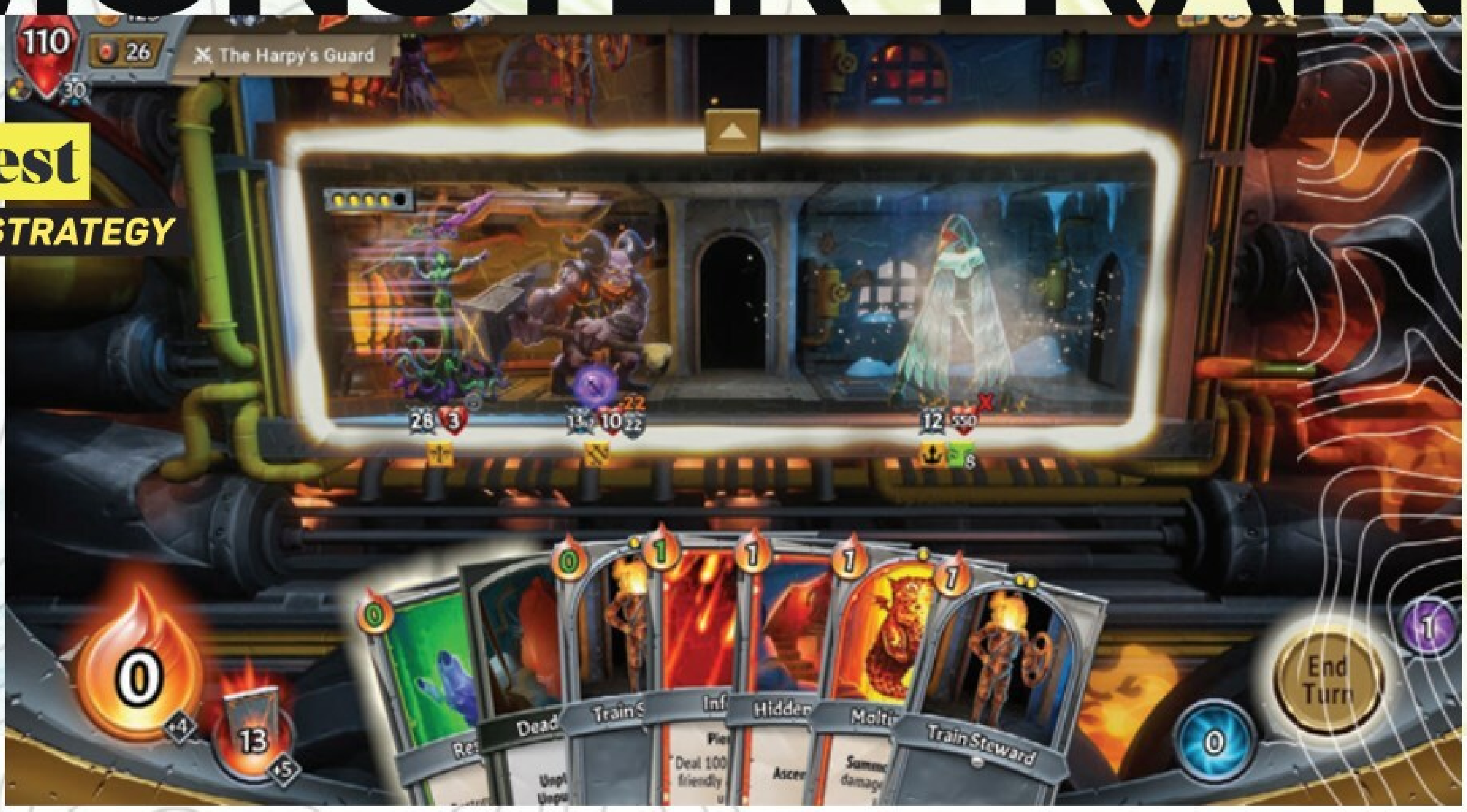
Genshin Impact

The amazing discovery elements in Genshin Impact keep you looking over every hill, across every body of water, and above to the vast reaches of the sky. A content-rich, free-to-play game-as-service with co-op possibilities, Genshin Impact excels at serving up an immense world to get lost in as you battle everything from adorable slimes to larger-than-life bosses. There's something soothing about harvesting every rock, flower, and scrap on the map that isn't nailed down, constantly advancing your characters and options after every fight and puzzle. Genshin Impact has all the captivating hooks and tools of RPGs to keep you coming back in an evolving adventure of exploration.

– Daniel Tack

MONSTER TRAIN

best
STRATEGY

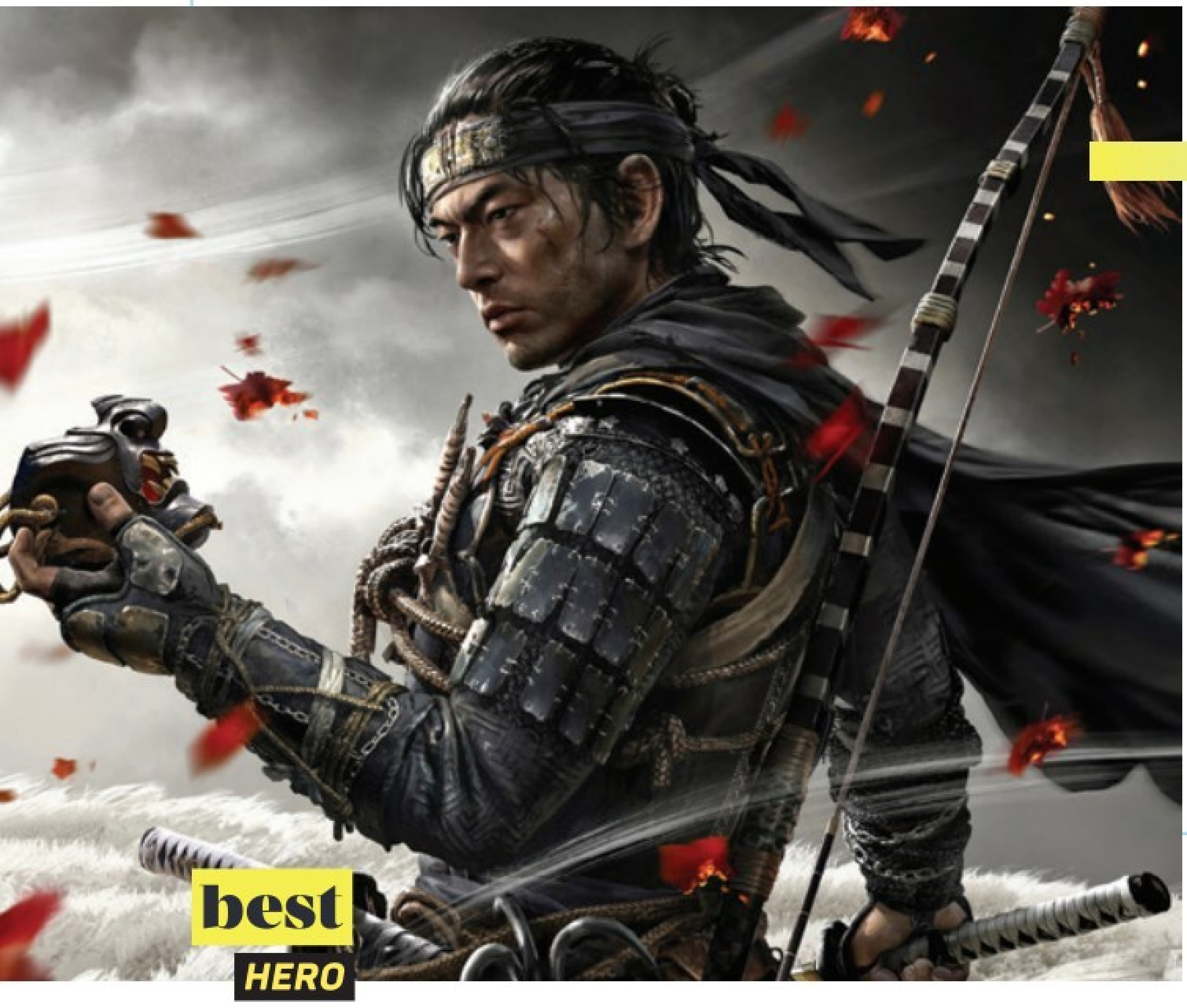


editor pick

Spiritfarer

The process of saying goodbye is generally seen as a sad one, but Spiritfarer acknowledges the sweet aspects as well as the bitter. You ferry the souls of the dead to whatever lies beyond, but even though the story is about death, it feels warm rather than grim. You get to know your passengers, build them homes, and do favors to help them move on. Most of this happens on your cozy ship, which you expand and improve through a series of progressively more complex crafting loops. Even so, this gorgeous 2D simulation isn't overwhelming – you can even play co-op, with a second player controlling an adorable cat. In a hard year like this one, I love how Spiritfarer embraces sadness and manages to transmute it into optimism.

– Joe Juba



best
HERO

JIN SAKAI

Ghost of Tsushima is, at its core, a tale about struggle. The tension between tradition and obsolescence is hard to ignore, and it's perfectly encapsulated by Jin Sakai's presence. Throughout his journey, Jin grapples with how to honor his family while also defending his way of life from invaders and the march of time. It's a struggle he handles with grace and strength.

editor pick

Wasteland 3

InXile Entertainment not only told a compelling story about a group of desert rangers trying to survive the icy wastes of a post-nuclear Colorado, but gave players an unparalleled level of freedom to shape and change that story. Every choice feels meaningful to the world around you, and I often marveled at how sometimes trivial decisions would come back to haunt me hours later. Wasteland 3 is full of absurd moments and dark humor, but I loved the crew of maniacs I assembled to watch my back during these tense turn-based combat encounters. I also loved the roll-out of new skills and abilities that helped me find creative solutions to combat challenges or cleverly circumnavigate battles altogether. There has never been a better time to jump into the Wasteland series.

– Ben Reeves

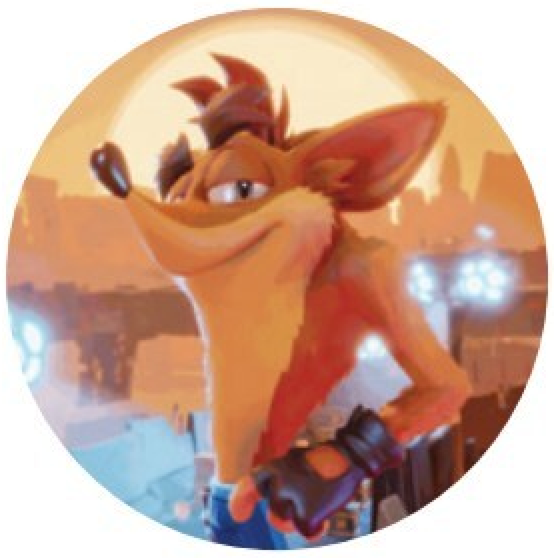
best

DEVELOPER

SUPERGIANT

From Bastion to Transistor to Pyre, Supergiant has consistently proven itself as one of gaming's premier developers, but things finally reached a crescendo with the release of Hades. Even after spending two years fine-tuning the game in Early Access, Hades' superb quality defied expectations, cementing Supergiant's place at the top of the mountain.

editor pick



Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time

Younger players may find it hard to believe that Crash Bandicoot once dominated the platforming genre alongside Mario. The former mascot's aptly named fourth entry does a fantastic job showing why that was the case and that the old bandicoot still has a lot left in the tank. The classic platforming holds up remarkably well, but the new mask powers add exciting layers of fun. Abilities like phasing objects in and out of existence or slowing time to a crawl fit like a glove, as does controlling fun characters like Tawna or Dingodile. Crash Bandicoot 4 is far from a walk in the park; in fact, it's one of the year's toughest games. But like a masochistic Oliver Twist, I kept asking for more because the game is just too much fun.

– Marcus Stewart

DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

best

COOPERATIVE

best
MOMENT

LIFTOFF

The Last of Us Part II has plenty of violent and unsettling scenes, but the moment that stands out the most is quiet and sweet. As Joel and Ellie sit together in a spacecraft on display in a museum, she plays the birthday present he gave her: a recording of a rocket launch. She closes her eyes and listens reverently as the audio sends her into space – an intimate moment of escape that emphasizes Joel and Ellie's bond.

editor pick

Gears Tactics

Whether it stems from a lack of interest or intelligence, I've never been one for the strategy genre. That is, until Gears Tactics was released. What's most impressive about Splash Damage's tactical tale is its ability to translate what I love about the original series without sacrificing its identity as a stellar strategy experience. Gears Tactics pushes you to be aggressive and rewards you with the satisfying executions we've come to know and love. But make no mistake, you must be thoughtful in your planning and know that the Locust won't roll over just because you run in with a Gnasher. Combine that with an interesting Gears story and you have a thrilling title that appeals to genre fans old and new that has opened my mind to a whole new world of games. *– Alex Stadnik*

editor pick

Sackboy: A Big Adventure

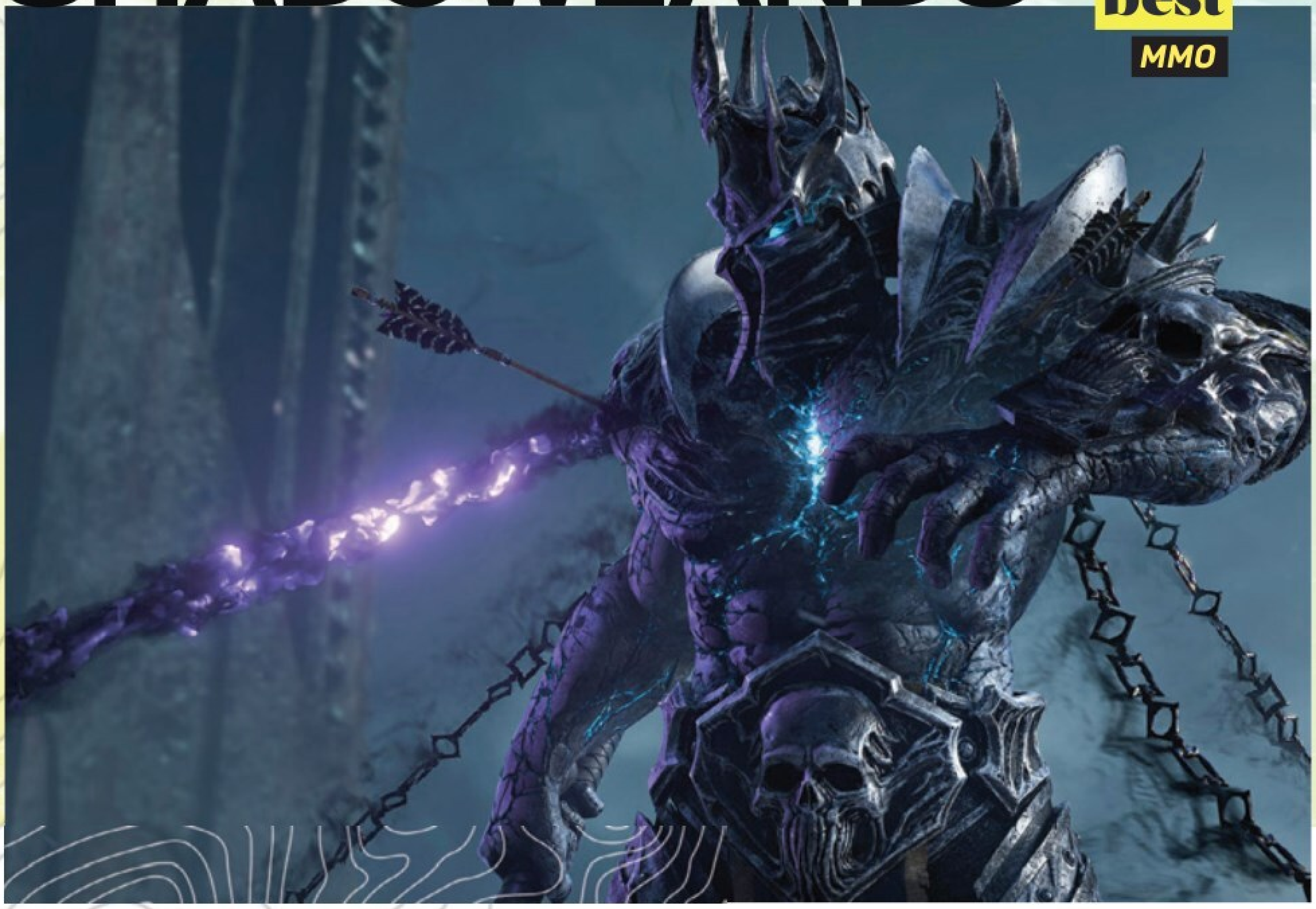
It was a pretty heavy year overall, which is probably why I was so happy that Sumo Digital's platformer arrived when it did. I'm admittedly a sucker for Sackboy's hand-crafted aesthetic, even if LittleBigPlanet's floaty controls and build-it-yourself ethos didn't entirely work for me. This delightful spinoff gives the series' mascot a chance to thrive in his own spotlight. There's a lengthy series of imaginative levels – some of which include action syncopated to the soundtrack, à la Rayman Legends – and it's hard not to crack a consistent grin throughout the journey. I'm not quite as in love with the chaotic co-op, but when I'm looking to spend some time in a charming other world, this was one big adventure I returned to time and again. *– Jeff Cork*

THE ROOM VR: A DARK MATTER

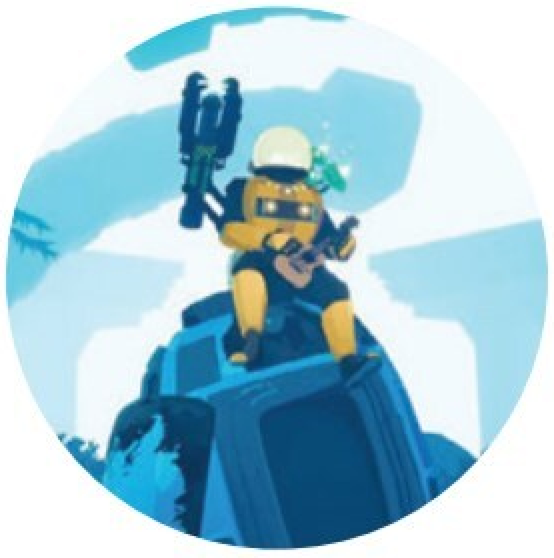
best
PUZZLE

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: SHADOWLANDS

best
MMO



editor pick



Risk of Rain 2

Risk of Rain 2 is a roguelike cooperative shooter wherein up to four players blast their way through a variety of alien biomes in pursuit of items to customize and upgrade their characters. You start each playthrough with only your class-based abilities, but quickly rise to comical levels of power thanks to the randomized equipment you scavenge along the way. In a year that brought feelings of isolation, Risk of Rain 2 served as one of the games that allowed me to keep up with friends old and new, as the game is lightweight enough that it can be played on console or even an older PC with no issue.

– Alex Van Aken

editor pick

Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War

Call of Duty campaigns are often hit or miss, and Black Ops Cold War somehow succeeds at keeping the fast-paced fervor often associated with the franchise while taking things in completely wild directions. While I enjoy blasting my way through a level as much as anyone else, the bizarre mind-play elements made the campaign much more interesting and enjoyable, especially during a few missions that feature more choice. Of course, there's compelling multiplayer to be had as well, and I'm still working on gunsmithing the perfect weapon in some Kill Confirmed with friends as you read this.

– Daniel Tack

best
ENDING

PERSONA 5 ROYAL

Persona 5 Royal boasts extra hours of engaging gameplay and a final arc that culminates in an epic boss fight where character aspirations and ideologies collide. The Persona series' stylish visuals are in full effect and the addition of new, swelling battle songs makes the Phantom Thieves' final heist all the more memorable and satisfying.

EDITOR TOP 10 PICKS

2020

Andrew Reiner

1. The Last of Us Part II
2. Ghost of Tsushima
3. Hades
4. Ori and the Will of the Wisps
5. Assassin's Creed Valhalla
6. Cyberpunk 2077
7. Immortals Fenyx Rising
8. Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales
9. Yakuza: Like a Dragon
10. Call of Duty: Warzone

Matt Miller

1. Ghost of Tsushima
2. Ori and the Will of the Wisps
3. Assassin's Creed Valhalla
4. The Last of Us Part II
5. Destiny 2
6. Hades
7. Fuser
8. Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales
9. Cyberpunk 2077
10. 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim

Joe Juba

1. The Last of Us Part II
2. Yakuza: Like a Dragon
3. Ghost of Tsushima
4. Final Fantasy VII Remake
5. Assassin's Creed Valhalla
6. Animal Crossing: New Horizons
7. Spiritfarer
8. 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim
9. Cyberpunk 2077
10. Kentucky Route Zero

Jeff Cork

1. Ghost of Tsushima
2. Yakuza: Like a Dragon
3. Immortals Fenyx Rising
4. Animal Crossing: New Horizons
5. Astro's Playroom
6. Assassin's Creed Valhalla
7. Hades
8. Fortnite
9. Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 + 2
10. Watch Dogs: Legion

Ben Reeves

1. Ori and the Will of the Wisps
2. Half-Life: Alyx
3. The Last of Us Part II
4. Hades
5. Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales
6. Assassin's Creed Valhalla
7. Immortals Fenyx Rising
8. Yakuza: Like a Dragon
9. Black Mesa
10. XCOM: Chimera Squad

Kimberley Wallace

1. The Last of Us Part II
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10. 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim

Daniel Tack

1. Hades
2. Demon's Souls
3. Yakuza: Like a Dragon
4. Genshin Impact
5. Call of Duty: Warzone
6. Monster Train
7. Visage
8. World of Warcraft: Shadowlands
9. Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout
10. Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War

Brian Shea

1. Ghost of Tsushima
2. The Last of Us Part II
3. Persona 5 Royal
4. Yakuza: Like a Dragon
5. Spelunky 2
6. Final Fantasy VII Remake
7. Immortals Fenyx Rising
8. Assassin's Creed Valhalla
9. Fuser
10. Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales

Liana Ruppert

1. Yakuza: Like a Dragon
2. Hades
3. Half-Life: Alyx
4. Final Fantasy VII Remake
5. Phasmophobia
6. Cyberpunk 2077
7. Doom Eternal
8. Persona 5 Royal
9. Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales
10. Coffee Talk

Blake Hester

1. Call of Duty: Warzone
2. Persona 5 Royal
3. Ori and the Will of the Wisps
4. Astro's Playroom
5. Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 + 2
6. Kentucky Route Zero
7. The Last of Us Part II
8. Yakuza: Like a Dragon
9. Dreams
10. Doom Eternal

Marcus Stewart

1. Hades
2. The Last of Us Part II
3. Ori and the Will of the Wisps
4. Final Fantasy VII Remake
5. Animal Crossing: New Horizons
6. Yakuza: Like a Dragon
7. Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales
8. Watch Dogs: Legion
9. Ghost of Tsushima
10. Immortals Fenyx Rising

Jason Guisao

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Alex Stadnik

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Alex Van Aken

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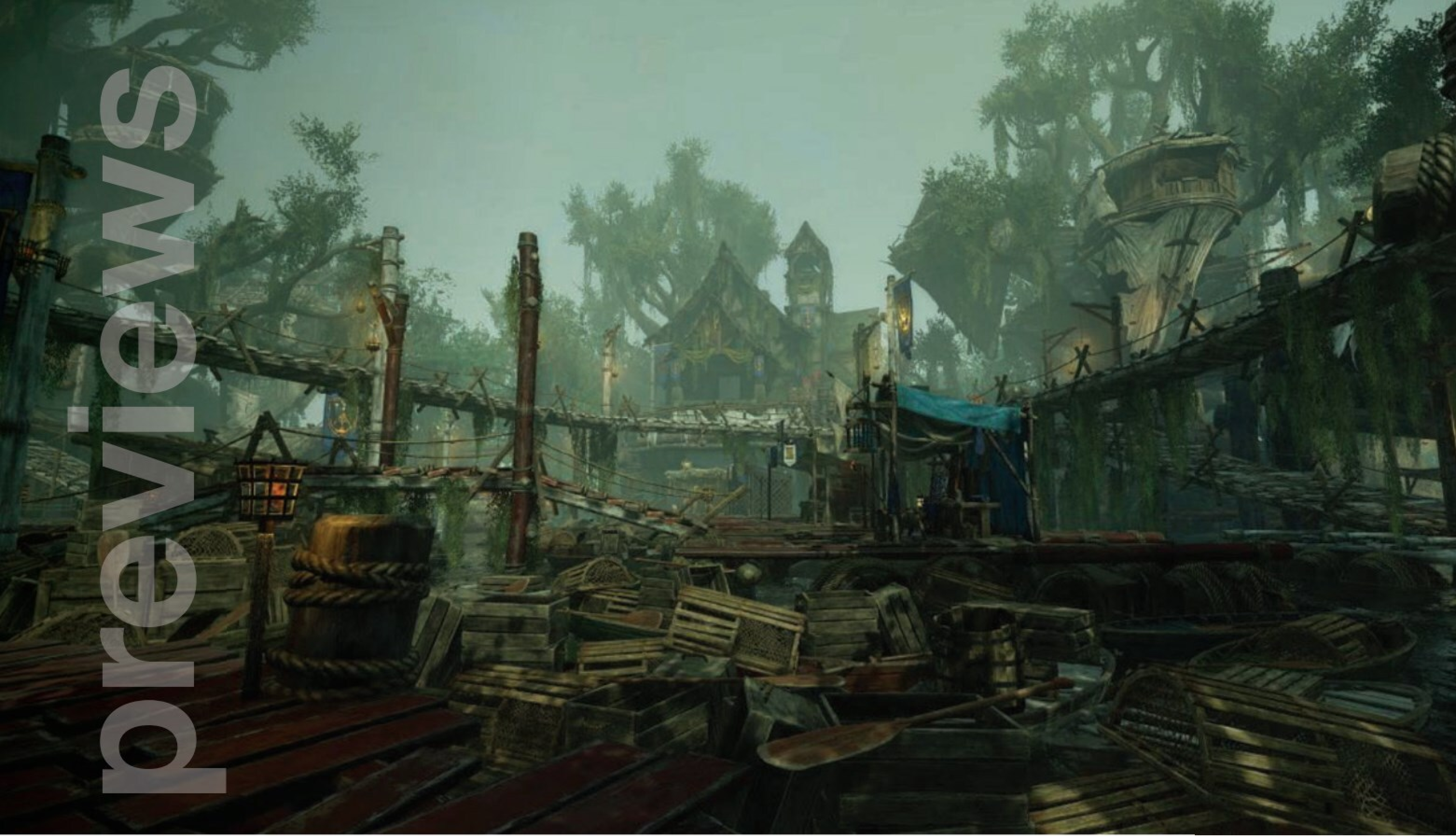
3. Ori and the Will of the Wisps
4. The Last of Us Part II
5. Yakuza: Like a Dragon
6. Half Life: Alyx
7. Risk of Rain 2
8. Cyberpunk 2077
9. Valorant
10. Immortals Fenyx Rising



New World

Can this be the launch success Amazon needs?

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Amazon Game Studios

» **Developer**
Amazon Game Studios, Double Helix Games

» **Release**
2021

As Amazon continues to work toward establishing itself in the games industry with its own studio, one adventure blends old-fashioned combat with the supernatural in a way that will interest MMORPG fans – that is, if the vision for New World matches up with the final product.

With a setting firmly rooted during the 16th century's Age of Exploration, New World follows a quest for the Fountain of Youth as it turns deadly, resulting in a world torn asunder by war, greed, and the desire for limitless power. Set in Aeternum Island, a fictional area in the Atlantic Ocean, my latest time with the game takes me to Reekwater, a place that lives up to its name; an area teeming with danger around every dark and twisted bend, filled with engulfing wetlands, territorial wildlife, and magic-driven foes. With a small town at the heart of it all, this gritty new area offers a different side to New World that bodes well for the experience, but the combat style and meritless quests have me worried that this vision might not reach its full potential.

Equipping my best gear and venturing out into the dangerous swamplands of Reekwater is exhilarating ... at first. Not being able to experience New World's campaign in sequential order naturally broke up the immersion, and Reekwater is meant to be explored much later in the game's progression. Knowing this, an instant engagement with the narrative isn't expected, but I'm still not convinced I will click with it at all.

When leaving Reekwater's small town, I immediately set out to explore. The actual exploration is fun if you ignore the plethora of enemies that are always around and the flawed combat when encountering them. Normally, I don't mind danger at every corner, but this feels redundant in part due to mechanics that, in their current state, feel broken. Every time I notice something is about to attack, I find myself groaning. It feels like a chore instead of the throes of exhilaration when conquering a new challenge.

Combat is clunky and feels outdated, not something of this gen. The response time from an attack prompt to its completion feels delayed in a way that constantly breaks any sort of immersion, and many times the attacks never seemed to register due to, what I'm assuming, are broken hitboxes.

Amazon did, however, fix a feature that was unanimously spoken against during an earlier play session, where cooldowns for different weapon types were dependent upon each other. Now that this is no longer an issue, I can go from my broadsword to my shield without worrying about being left open to attacks from prolonged cooldown periods. This move was the best thing the team could have done, because that mechanic essentially made PvP a cluster of chaos and frustration. The cooldown fix also makes the newly introduced spear an enjoyable inclusion, offering a freedom to choose between ranged and melee attacks with a skill tree that suits any playstyle, while comboing flawlessly with different weapon types.

New World has had several delays throughout its cycle, and after this most recent hands-on time with the game, they were needed. New World needs serious polishing before it aunches. Coming off of the failed release of Amazon's other game, Crucible, it's imperative that this team does everything it can to ensure a smooth launch for its vision to thrive. This attention to detail is even more vital with the plans to keep this live-service game alive with a constantly evolving play experience not unlike other MMORPGs out there like World of Warcraft and The Elder Scrolls Online. » **Liana Ruppert**

Maquette

A puzzling love story

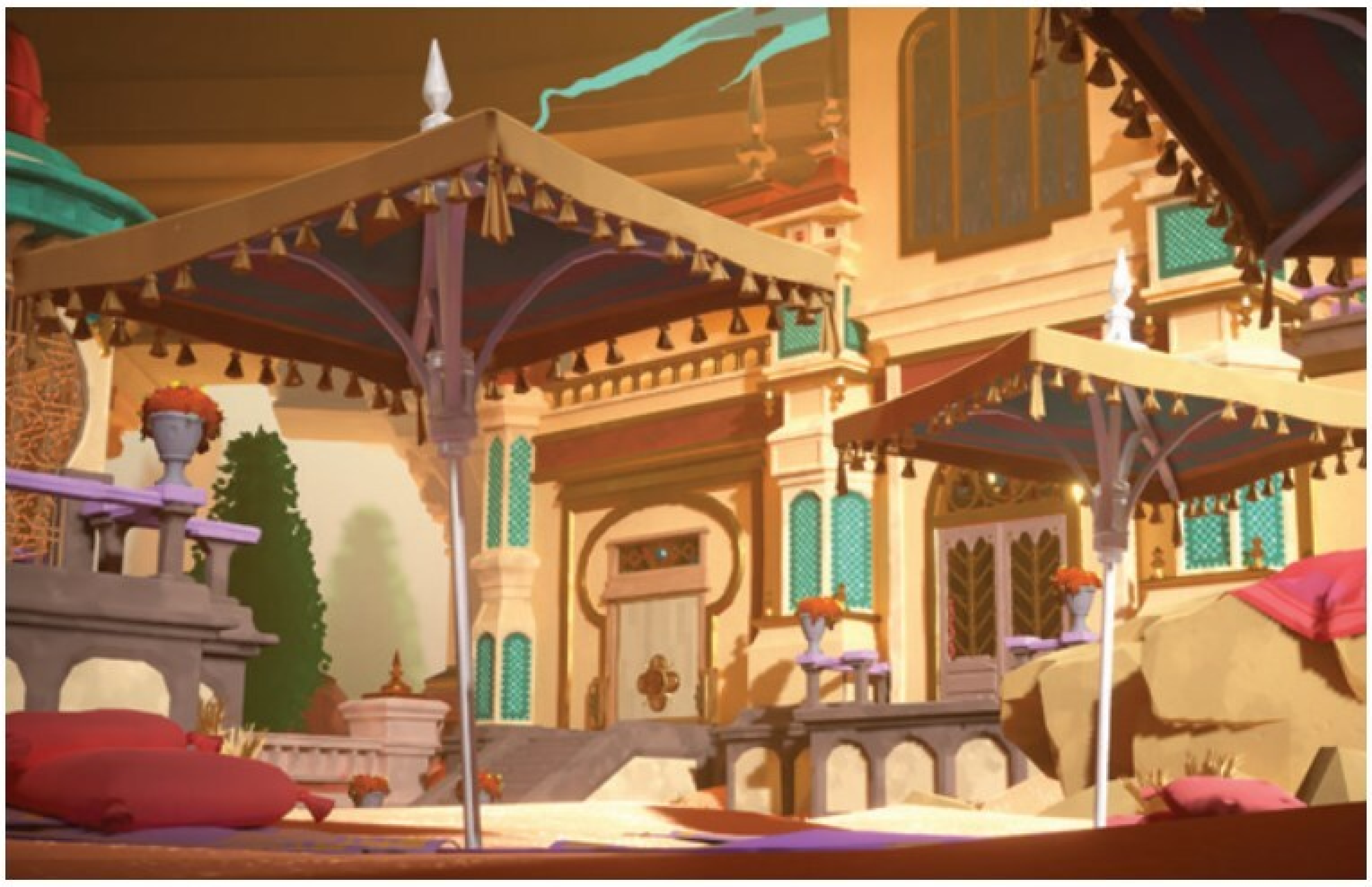
» **Platform**
PS5 • PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1- Player Puzzle

» **Publisher**
Annapurna Interactive

» **Developer**
Graceful Decay

» **Release**
2021



Maquette is a colorful indie game with an incredibly strong premise. You are an explorer trapped in a recursive world. In the center of your eerie dreamlike space is an exact model of your world, and any change you make to that model is reflected in the life-sized world around you. As a result, Maquette's clever puzzles often ask you to manipulate the model in the center of the world to open new pathways to explore. Developer Graceful Decay's puzzler captured our attention a few months back when we played its Pax East demo, which provided a good taste of its creative recursive puzzles. More recently, we went hands-on with a more expansive version to see how later levels continue to subvert expectations.

"We're trying to get the player to think about the game and its different scales," Graceful Decay founder and creative director Hanford Lemoore says. "The early chapters are about thinking about a small world and how you can change an object's size by moving it between worlds. In later puzzles, you're having to think about the large world and how you can use the larger world to your advantage – looking at the tiny things – paying attention to details that normally you would skip over. You wouldn't think about floorboards and baseboards in most games."

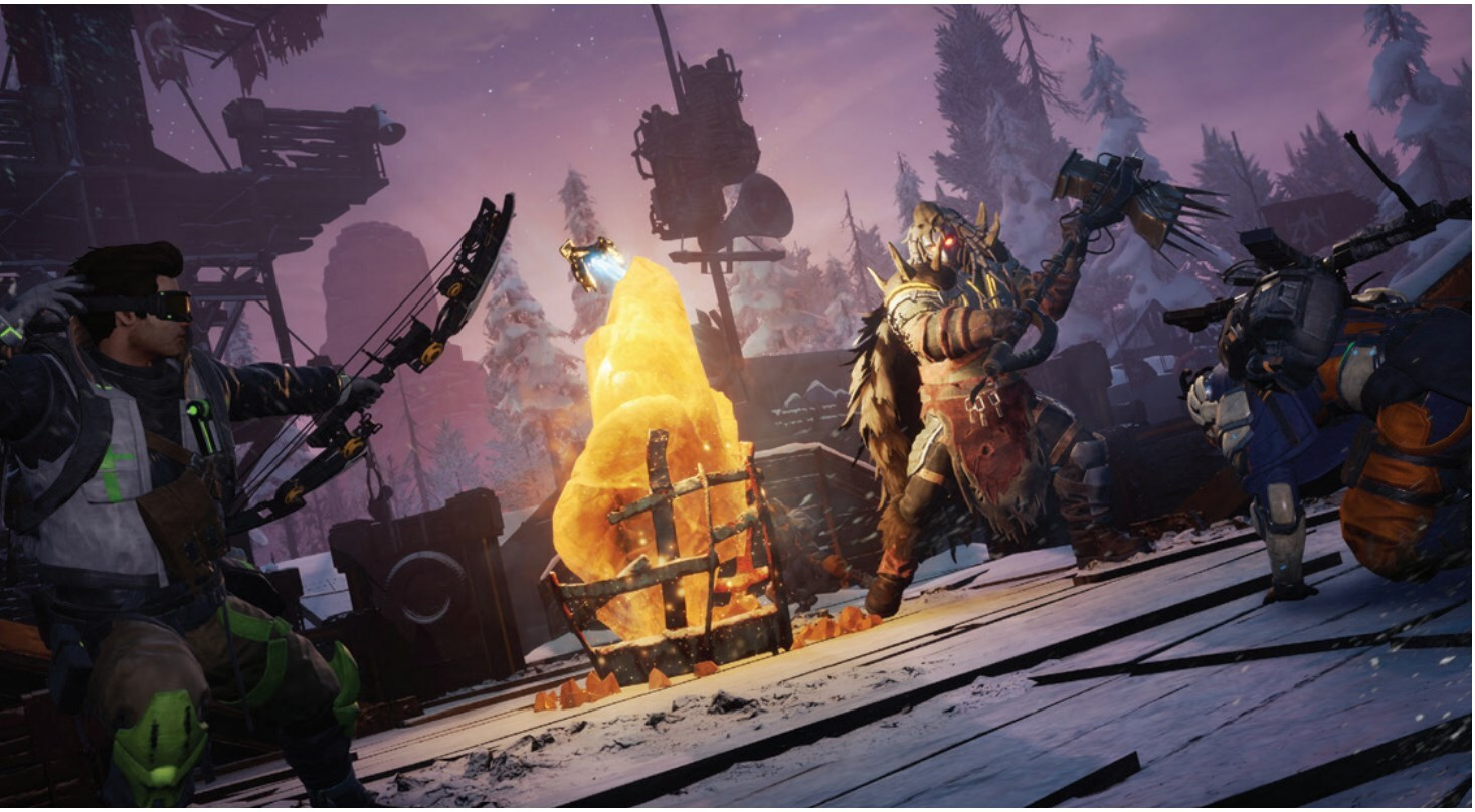
We begin to understand what Lemoore means when we explore some of Maquette's later areas. As we move away from the center of the world, which features the maquette model, we reach the edge of our world. Along one wall, we find a switch that opens a door leading to a much larger space. This extensive area looks exactly like the world we came from but is much bigger. In this new area we are about the size of a mouse, which presents a problem when we try to climb a set of stairs and discover that we aren't tall enough to reach the top lip of the first step. Fortunately, we're able to use a rake and several potted plants to platform our way to our destination.

"When you get into larger levels of the world, you're moving away from the center of the world, and we explore even larger levels of recursion," Lemoore says. "This space feels tiny but as you keep going, it gets bigger and bigger, and your character becomes smaller and smaller and less effective. So as you escape the center of the world, you kind of lose agency. Tiny little cracks that didn't bother you before can be major obstacles. Gameplay-wise and puzzle-wise, we wanted to give you that experience of being an ant and crawling through cracks in the floor."

As players explore these recursive puzzle worlds they are treated to a series of audio vignettes that tell a modern-day love story between a young man named Michael and a woman named Kenzie. These sequences are reflections on past events, but they aren't always happy memories. Lemoore says that players can easily skip the narrative elements if they're not in the mood, but that the story also has thematic ties to Maquette's mechanics.

"The game was designed around that mechanic of the world within the world within the world, and we've put together this love story that ties into that in direct and indirect ways," Lemoore says. "You can think of the puzzles as about exploring the relationship between objects and their size, and you can think about the story in a similar way. Think about things in your life: problems, relationships, how things change in importance over time. As you play the game, we want players to make connections as to what the love story is saying about the game, and what the puzzles and the game world say about the love story."

We already thought Maquette looked promising, but our recent demo left us even more excited for the finished product. Graceful Decay isn't ready to talk about a release date just yet, but Lemoore promised that the game would be out soon. You can probably expect this title to ship in early 2021.
» **Ben Reeves**



Scavengers

Snowbound survival

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
60-Player Online Action

» Publisher
Improbable

» Developer
Midwinter Entertainment

» Release
2021

With Scavengers, Midwinter Entertainment hopes to create a free-to-play third-person player-vs-player/player-vs-environment game that's different every play session, with numerous dangers and challenges to tackle. As a unique character and part of a three-person team, you contribute your survival skills as you scrounge for scrap, gear up, and eventually head for a ship to escape the chilling world if you can make it to the end of a round. Death isn't permanent as long as at least one teammate can stay alive, but if your entire team goes down at the same time, it's over. A mixing bowl of battle-royale elements and many other shooting game staples, Scavengers is looking for a slice of the team-based online multiplayer pie.

When you start a match, the first concern is finding a weapon and some scrap. Over the course of a game, large amounts of scrap are essential, as they allow you to craft signature weapons, enhanced defenses, and bolster your character's special move. Each character has a different useful ability, like cloaking to sneak around, speed boosting the entire team, or deploying a powerful shield. Scrap is everywhere in chests and boxes around the terrain, but often guarded by outlanders (enemy NPCs), dangerous wildlife like wolves and bears, or even bizarre undead aberrations that can swarm in a heartbeat.

Alongside a robust selection of guns, players can also employ melee weaponry that doesn't consume ammunition but can wear on the stamina meter. As you get geared up and explore, you have to make choices as to what to pursue, from supply drops for high-end gear to big pools of points.

The surviving team (if the whole team dies, it doesn't count!) with the most points at the end of the game wins. Be careful, as the point leader is highlighted on the map and will likely generate a lot of players eager to slaughter the team and claim those points for themselves. It's possible to bank points by finding data transmitters and holding them on the map, but the process may also invite trouble from deadly enemies and ambitious players looking for an easy haul, as it's tempting to just take out another team for a truckload of points rather than scour the map and battle outlanders for them.

The action is forced over the course of the game through an ever-closing circle that battle-royale fans will immediately recognize. In addition, snowstorms and other dangers are prevalent on the map, obscuring vision and freezing players if they can't find fire to warm up by.

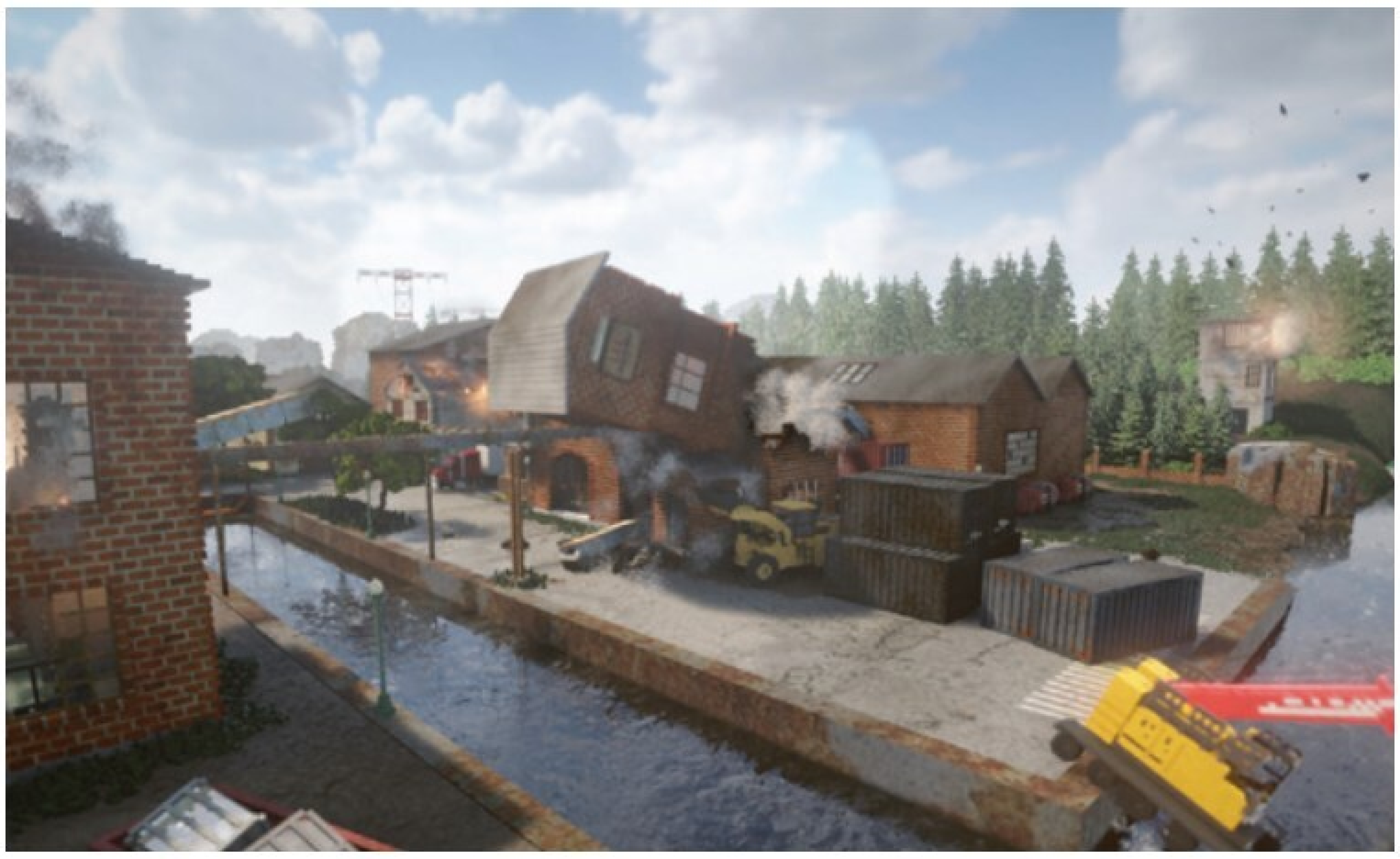
If you make it to the end of a game, a dropship lands and your team has five minutes to make it there. Only one member of your team needs to survive and make it for credit, but the minutes leading up to the ship takeoff are often brutal as all players converge in the same area. Point totals can shift rapidly here and entire teams can be eliminated. Only one team is crowned victor at the end of the game, but there's meta-progression for all.

Unlike many other single-session battle-royale affairs, you leave each game with collected resources to craft useful unlocks for sessions in the future. Your loadout is customizable, and while it doesn't let you enter a game fresh with powerful new gear, what you're changing is what you can craft during a game with scrap. By crafting new recipes you can stick into your loadout, you can tailor the arsenal and skillset to your interests, whether that's sculpting a powerful assassin's bow or maximizing your survival skills with portable heat sources and tools.

Seasonal content is slated to keep the survival fresh with new characters, enemies, weapons, loadout recipes, and more. This isn't the first time we've seen PvE/PvP hybrid shooters try to shake things up, but we're looking forward to seeing what's in store for Scavengers as it heads to a 2021 release. » **Daniel Tack**

Teardown

Smash and grab



» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Puzzle/Action

» Publisher
Tuxedo Labs

» Developer
Tuxedo Labs

» Release
TBA

Teardown has been a smash hit since it launched on Steam Early Access this October. The game blends freeform environmental destruction with careful heist planning, then wraps it up in a beautiful voxel art style to form an intriguing and entertaining package. Teardown comes courtesy of Dennis Gustafsson and his small team at Tuxedo Labs, and it shows a lot of promise thus far.

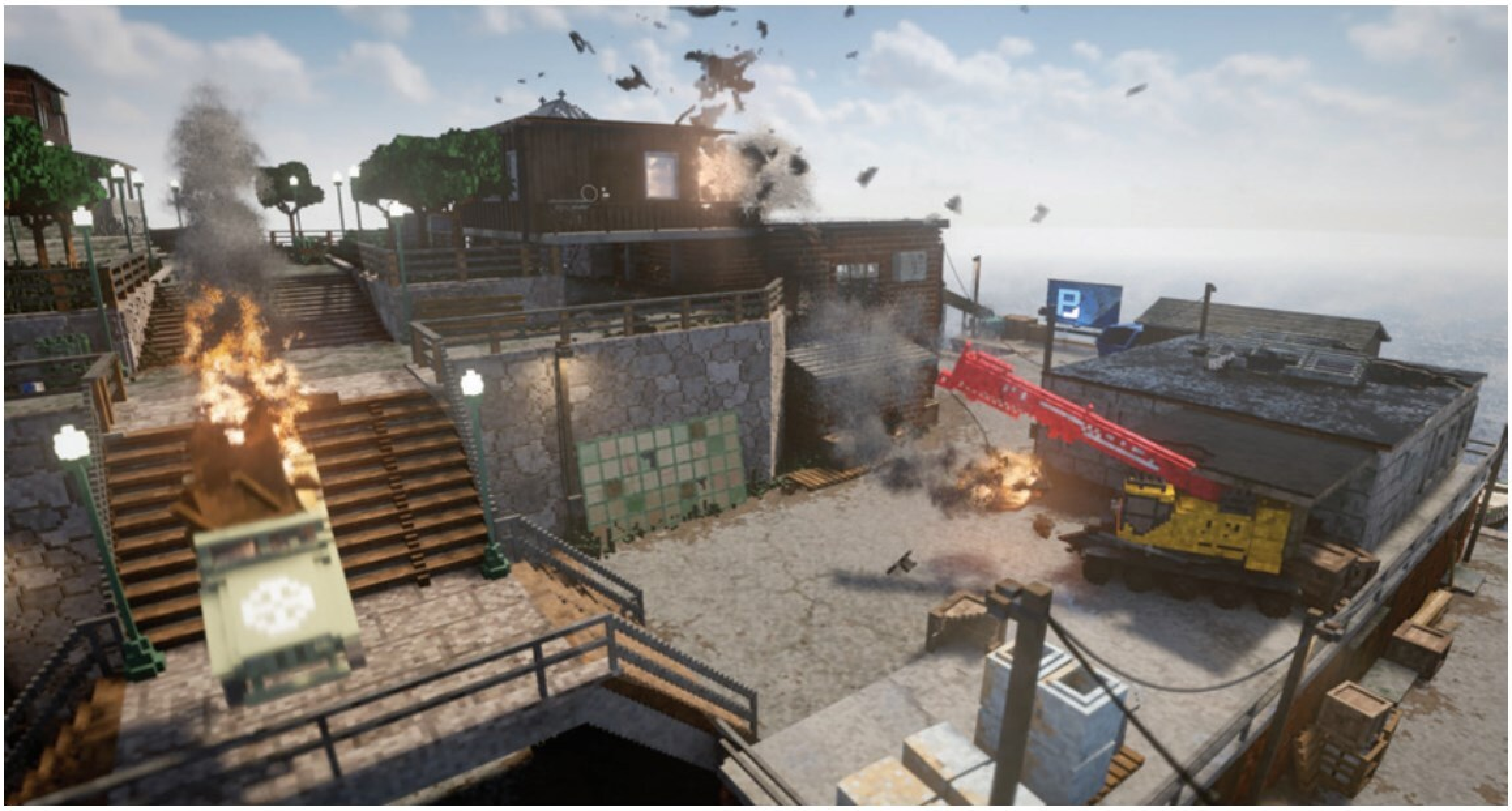
As a demolition-obsessed criminal, you must earn a living by completing shady contracts vetted by your equally dubious mother. These wacky tasks play off the protagonist's talent for destruction. In one mission, a rich snob contracts you to demolish a pier in order to park his oversized yacht. The core of the experience, though, is a set of missions that task players with stealing/destroying several targets within a short time limit.

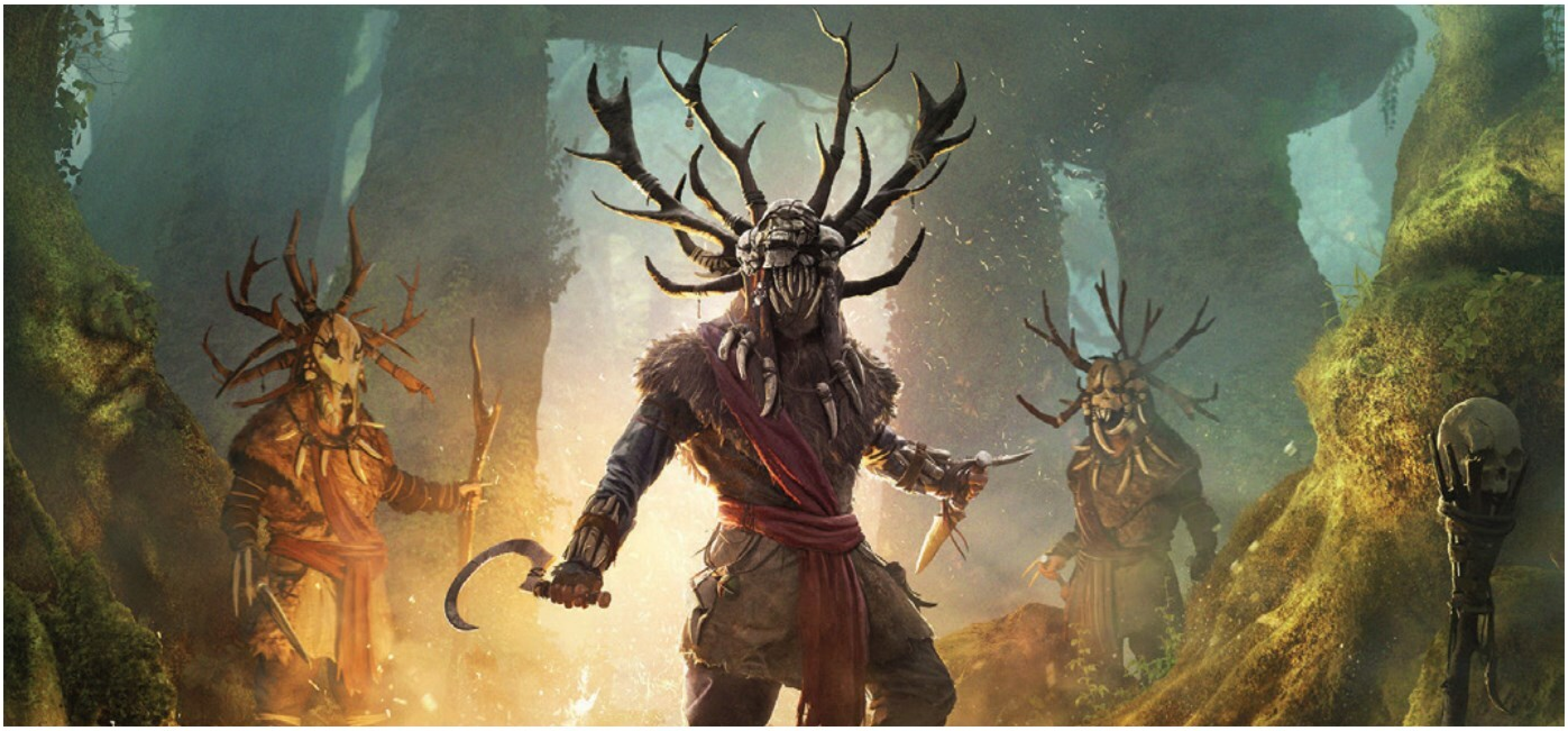
Pulling these jobs off requires players to create quick routes between the objectives. When I say "create routes" I actually mean "blow holes into walls, impale rooftops with cranes, and raze entire buildings to the ground." Teardown gives players the freedom to be as destructive and creative as they want, and that extends to the arsenal. Sledgehammers, flamethrowers, rockets, plus a bevy of construction vehicles are just a few of the toys at players' disposal. You have to be careful, however, as some areas have alarms that will alert the police if certain objects get destroyed or if fires get out of hand. Gustafsson tells *Game Informer* the heist premise came after a year of figuring out gameplay that complimented technology, with axed ideas including an ill-conceived stealth game.

Tearing things apart is not only fun but surprisingly therapeutic. I can think of no better way to relieve lingering stresses from the last year than by smashing a barn into rubble. Thankfully, a separate Sandbox mode provides an objective-free playground to do just that.

Teardown's beautiful voxel graphics do wonders for selling the destruction. It may be blocky but everything looks razor sharp thanks to the fantastic lighting and shader effects. Choosing voxels over polygons not only showcases the destruction better, but Gustafsson says is more practical from a design standpoint. While polygonal assets can only break so many ways (with designers having to create separate models for each broken version of an object), voxels shatter more naturally no matter how they're broken.

Tuxedo Labs plans to keep Teardown in Early Access for at least a year to fine tune mechanics, test new features, and, most importantly, incorporate player feedback. As Part 2 of the campaign comes together, updates such as full-fledged mod support should arrive sooner than later. Gustafsson says controller support, a much-requested feature, is also on the table. The same doesn't appear to be true for a console release of the game due to technical restraints, at least for now. That's a bummer for console players, but if you're a PC fan looking for a unique take on heist gameplay or a fun outlet to break stuff without consequence, Teardown should be on your radar. » **Marcus Stewart**



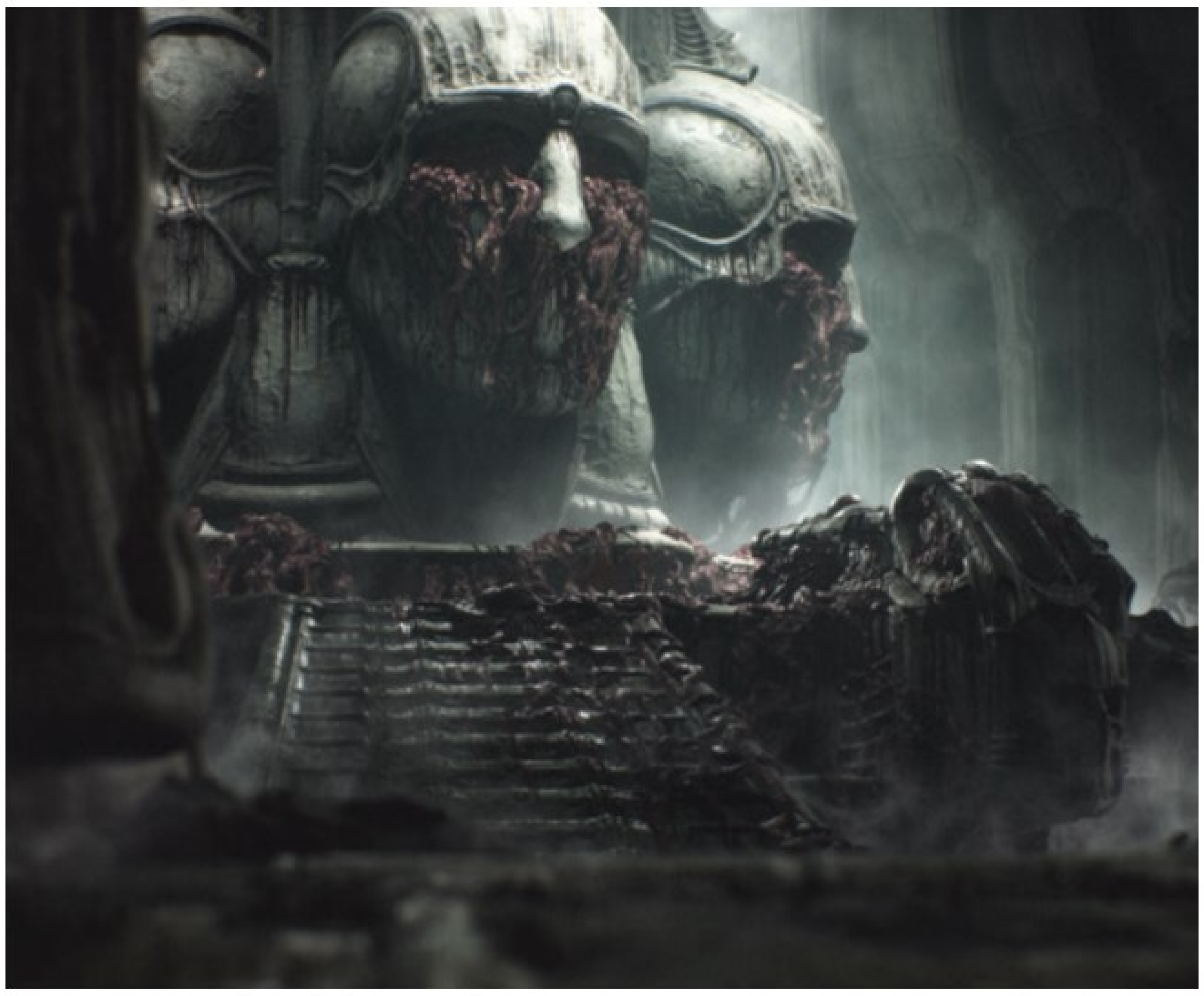


Assassin’s Creed Valhalla

Ubisoft is expanding on its massive open-world Viking fantasy in the coming months with even more content – both paid and free. All players will get access to seasonal updates at no cost, including new modes, cosmetic options, gear, and abilities. However, Ubisoft is also planning two paid expansions for 2021 that bring more substantial additions. The first is called Wrath of the Druids (pictured), and it sends Eivor on a folklore-infused quest to track down a cult in Ireland. The second is called The Siege of Paris, which is exactly what it sounds like. Wrath of the Druids doesn’t release until spring, but fans can look for the seasonal offerings (like the Viking Yule Festival) in the meantime.

Scorn

Scorn’s grotesque alien monstrosities, techno-organic aesthetic (evoking the works of H. R. Giger), and unsettling atmosphere turned heads when it appeared during the first Xbox Series X gameplay showcase. Developer Ebb Software has been working on Scorn since 2016, and describes it as a first-person horror adventure in a dreamlike world. But that dream probably feels more like a nightmare, with players exploring interconnected environments and battling disgusting foes using equally gross weapons. We still don’t know much about the narrative, but the creepy vibe and eye-catching art direction is more than enough to lure us in. Brave souls can tackle Scorn when it arrives on Xbox Series X/S and PC sometime in 2021.

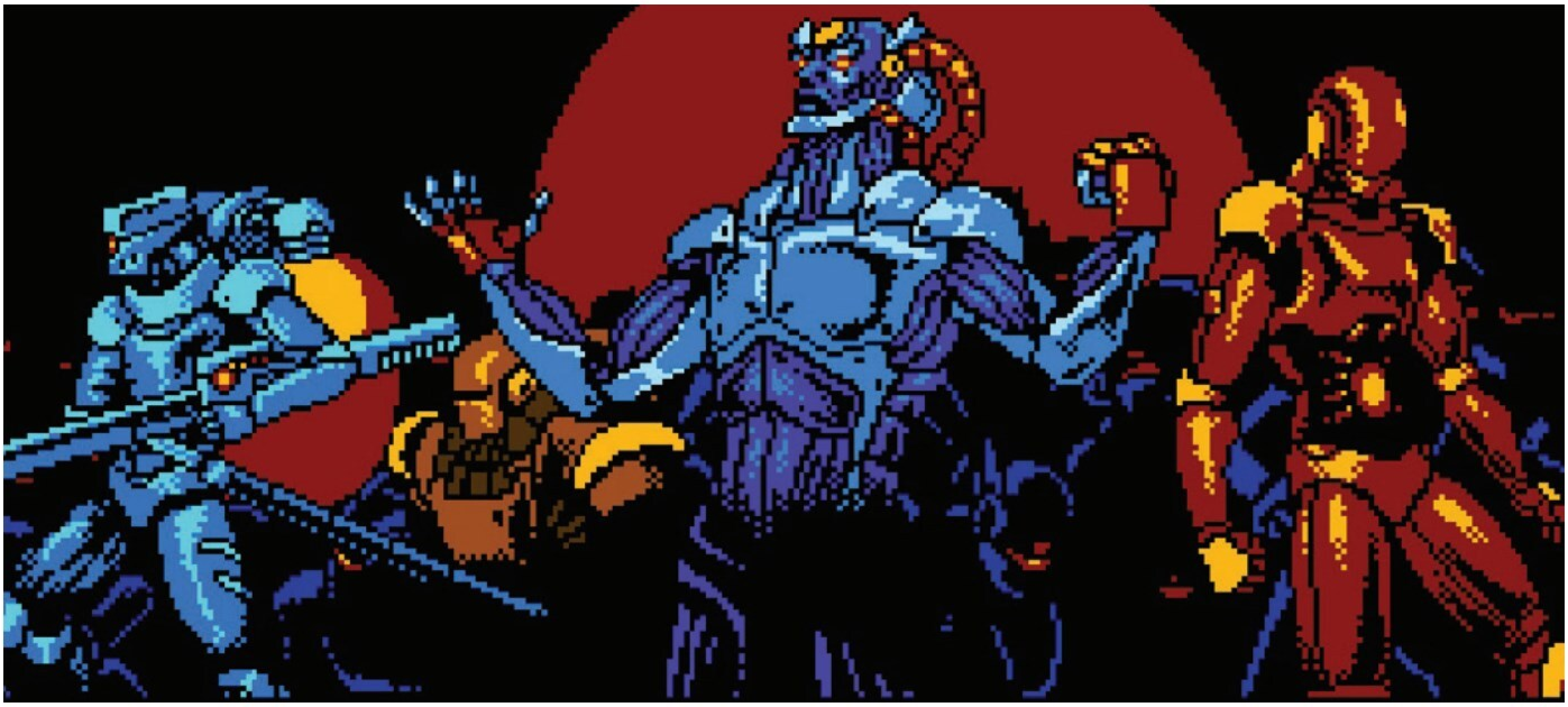


Tunche

Tunche is a four-player co-op game that combines mechanics from hack-and-slash, beat ‘em up, side-scroller, and roguelike genres to create a fast-paced combat experience. Players must select from five adventurers with distinct fighting styles, then battle through dangerous hordes of monsters and bosses in the sprawling Amazon Forest. Learning the proper balance between long-range attacks and juggling combos can be the difference between clearing an arena (winning special consumables and extra experience points) or being sent back to the starting hub to attempt the adventure all over again. If anything, Tunche’s colorful, cartoony aesthetic brings a lightheartedness to the punishing combat, and its comic-book cutscenes are a welcome break from the action as you push deeper into the forest. Tunche releases this spring on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC.

Stalker 2

Ukranian developer GSC Game World has made three games in the Stalker series, but the streak ended when it canceled the fourth (called Stalker 2) back in 2012. Now, GSC is resurrecting the Stalker 2 name with a new project that retains the series' immersive brand of first-person survival horror, and features a non-linear story. GSC is also promising Stalker 2 will have one of the largest "seamless open worlds to date." Expect lots of twists and turns when you're able to revisit the nuclear wasteland one more time when Stalker 2 is released for Xbox Series X/S and PC sometime in 2021. Stalker 2 will also be available on Game Pass at release.

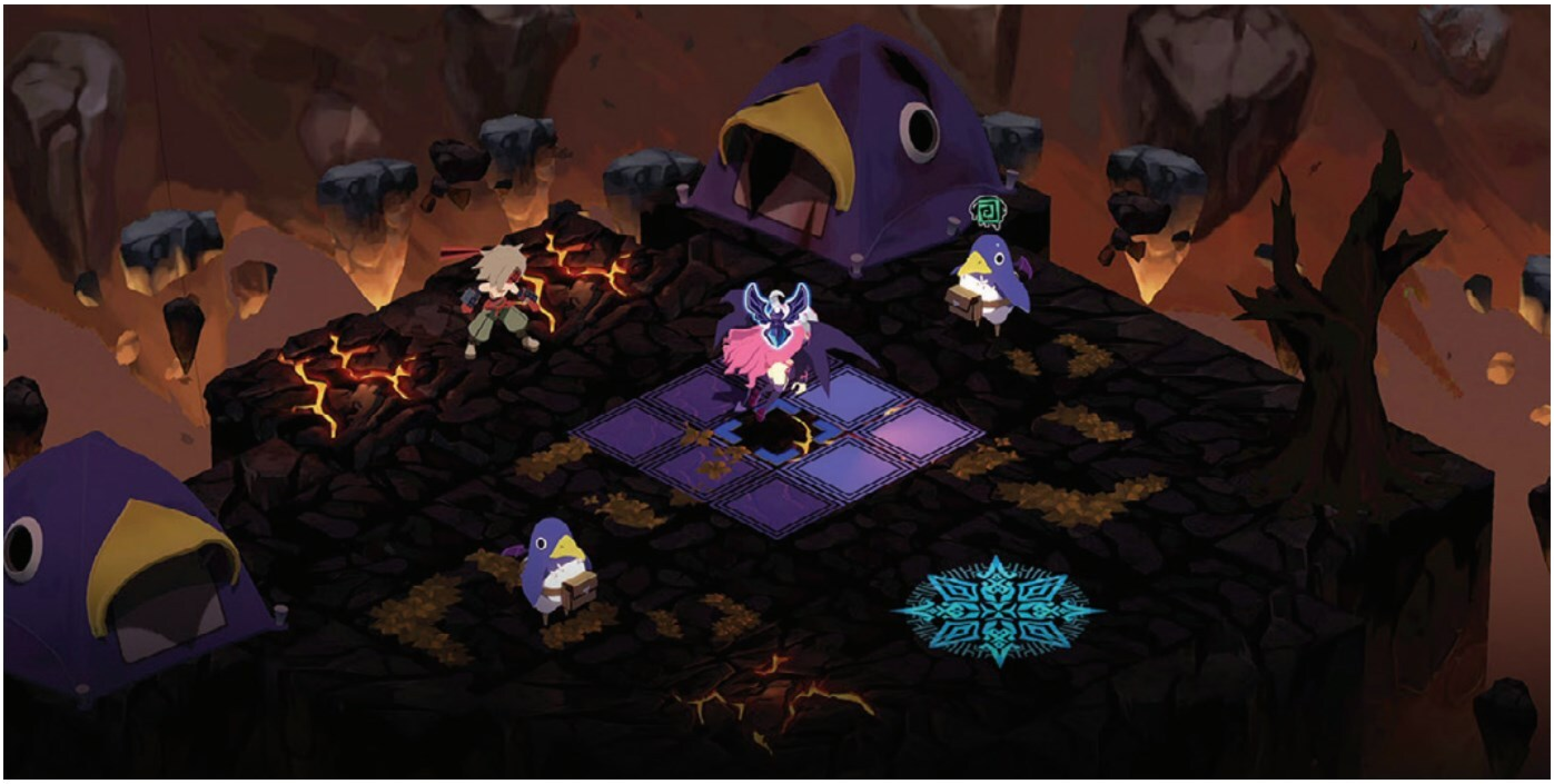


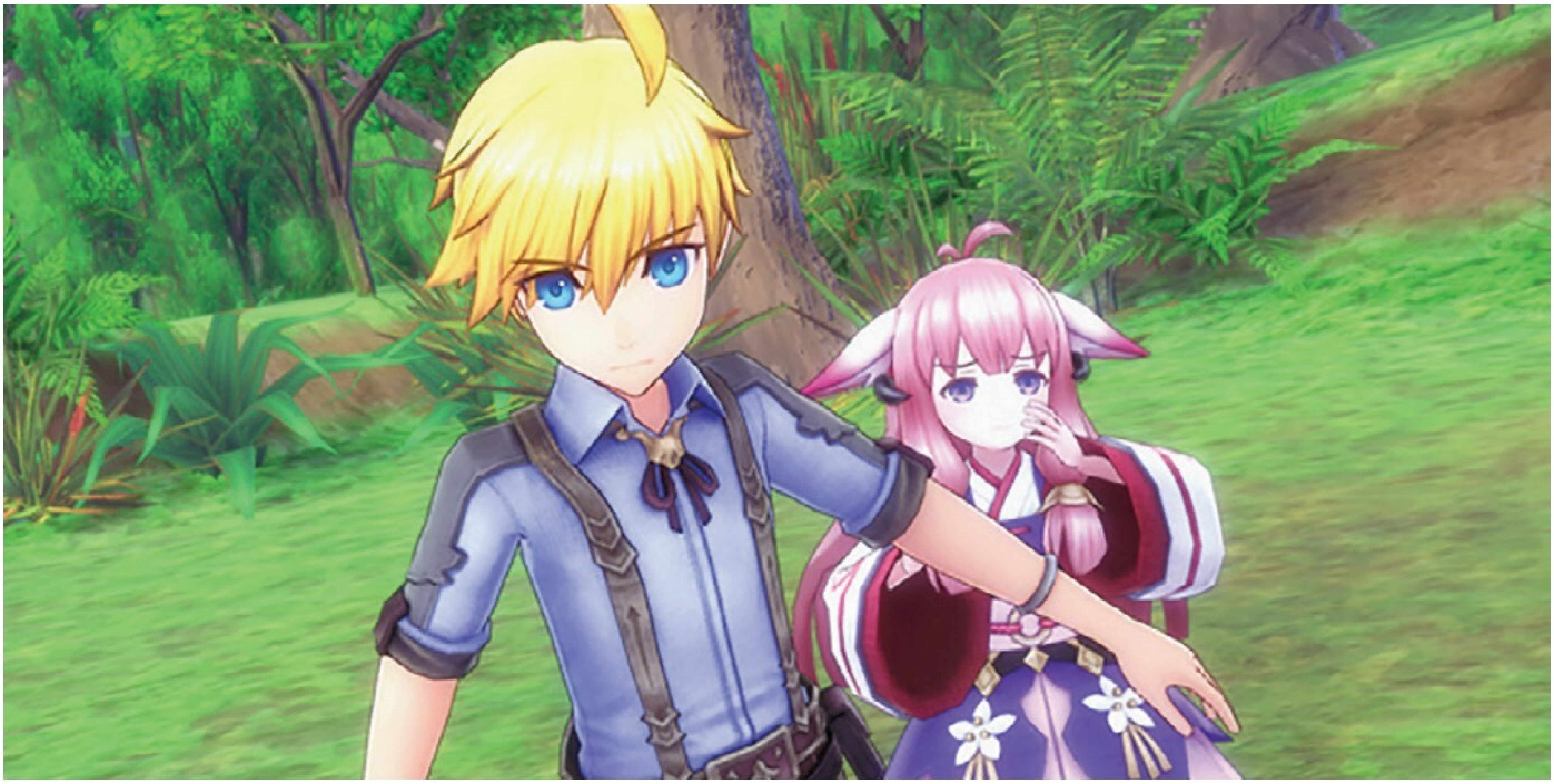
Cyber Shadow

Fans of classic Ninja Gaiden (or modern successors like The Messenger) should keep Cyber Shadow on their radar. As Shadow, the lone survivor of his ninja clan, players take down an evil doctor and his army of synthetic robots. Slice, dice, and leap across a slick techno sci-fi world rendered with beautifully animated 8-bit visuals. Along the way, Shadow uncovers new ninjutsu abilities useful for toppling myriad challenging foes, including over a dozen bosses. Cyber Shadow comes from developer Mechanical Head Games and is published by Yacht Club Games, creators of Shovel Knight. If you think you're ninja enough, you can tackle Cyber Shadow when it arrives January 26th for PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC.

Disgaea 6: Defiance Of Destiny

Nippon Ichi Software's outlandish strategy/RPG franchise is back with a new mainline entry hitting this summer on Switch. Expect the series' hallmark hilarity and deep strategy, but this time you play as a lowly zombie named Zed who uses a "super reincarnation" spell to bend situations in his favor. Along for the ride is the intelligent zombie pup, Cerberus; the singer, Melodia, who relies on the power of love; and the ultra-wealthy king of the human world, Misedor.



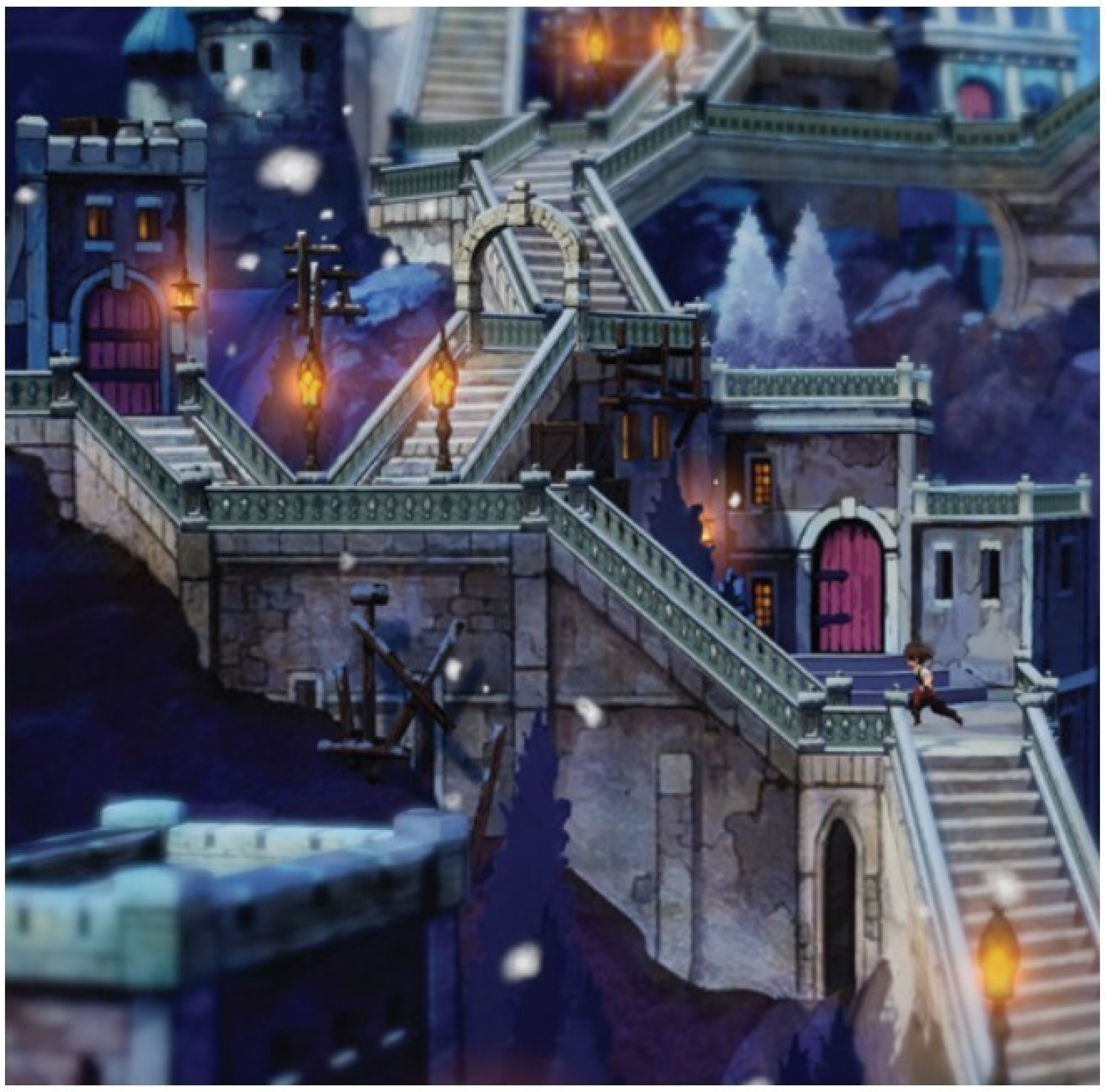


Rune Factory 5

Almost a decade since the last installment, the Rune Factory series is getting a new entry. With no memory of your previous life, you start a new chapter as a peacekeeping ranger in a rural town. You harvest crops, go fishing, fight baddies, and most importantly, find love and happiness. Combo attacks are a big addition to combat, giving you fun ways to involve your allies in the action. New places and faces await when the game launches next year on Switch.

Bravely Default II

Square Enix's fan-favorite RPG series continues with Bravely Default II. Unlike 2016's Bravely Second: End Layer, which continued the story of the original game, this title brings a fresh cast of characters to an all-new world. Similar to its predecessors, Bravely Default II uses a turn-based combat system that lets players balance risk and reward while utilizing different skills, jobs, and abilities. Bravely Default II comes to Switch on February 26.



Immortals Fenyx Rising

We clearly loved the debut of Ubisoft's latest open-world action franchise (read our review on p. 78), so it should be no surprise that we're enthusiastically awaiting more Immortals content. Thankfully, Ubisoft Quebec has announced its post-launch plans, which include a new storyline for Fenyx, a dive into Chinese mythology starring a new hero named Ku, and another look at Greek mythology featuring a hero named Ash with top-down brawler combat. Ubisoft hasn't specified the timeframe for this content's release, but Immortals has plenty to keep you busy while you wait.

Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time Remake

In 2003, Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time revolutionized 3D platforming for generations to come. With this Sands of Time remake, Ubisoft plans to remind fans of why they fell in love with the classic while introducing a generation of newcomers to one of the most important games of the '00s. The update keeps the design largely intact, but boasts updated cinematics, improved parkour animations, a modernized control scheme (though you can switch to the classic layout), and even re-recorded dialogue by the original voice cast. Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time Remake launches March 18 for PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC. ◆

reviews

EDITORS' CHOICE
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78 Immortals Fenyx Rising

In a month filled with juggernaut game releases, Immortals Fenyx Rising stands tall like the gods it showcases. Ubisoft is no stranger to Greek mythology, but Immortals spins it in a refreshing way that blends comedy with meaningful open-world exploration. It also soars with its puzzles and combat, creating an experience that is continually rewarding and hard to put down.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	**5**	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	**4**	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	**3**	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	**2**	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	**1**	Console scalpers.

Destiny 2: Beyond Light

Smaller world, new trajectory

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Bungie **Developer** Bungie
Release November 10 (PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC), December 8 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S) **Rating** T

Beyond Light has the feel of a turning point. In a long-running living game with many expansions and seasons to its name, Destiny 2 is always changing, but this installment feels different. The past and future of the franchise rotate around this release, which clears away much of the old and sets the stage for new story and gameplay beats. Like a tree that needs to get pruned back to allow for healthy growth, it also means that Beyond Light's release leaves the game looking especially barren. Even as I'm excited to discover new powers and activities, the breadth of the overall experience has been reduced.

Several separate storylines converge to kick things off, sending players to the frigid moon of Europa to meet a couple of long-missing allies and fight a surging army of ice-cold Fallen aliens. In a plot turn that doesn't feel especially earned after years of fighting its encroachment, your Guardian is forced to take on the powers of Darkness itself to hold back the tide. The campaign features several fun missions, but I was surprised at the way it is balanced, demanding either significant grinding or several battles that are frustrating endurance chores to tackle solo.

The Darkness-infused Stasis powers are mostly used against you by enemy bosses in the early hours, and it simply isn't much fun to be frozen in place in a game all about speed and freedom of movement. Once Stasis powers open up for regular use, the new subclasses add an interesting strategic tool to explore, and feature some gorgeous visual and sound effects that recall crystalline ice formations and shattering showers of sleet. The Hunter and Warlock powers are exciting and distinct, though I was disappointed by the Titan's similarity to its own existing Arc powerset. No matter the class, I enjoyed using Stasis in PvE activities, but I've struggled to warm to its presence in PvP, where it feels like the barriers and freezing slow down the pace of play. I was also frustrated by the grindy nature of unlocking the subclasses for multiple characters; for the significant percentage of players who like to try out all three, it's quite tedious.

Huge swaths of old activities and destinations have been swept away in Beyond Light, and a design decision to "sunset" the majority of old weapons and armor combine to subtract a lot of beloved playstyles. Simply put, the absence is keenly felt. Europa is a beautiful new location to uncover, filled with vast snowy plains and mysterious underground facilities, but in a game about ever-expanding horizons, it's strange to suddenly have fewer places to play out missions. Europa is forced to bear too much weight as a gameplay and mission destination, without the relief of more alternate locations. And as of now, there are too few new armaments to justify the obsolescence of so much of players' existing collections.

I was pleased to see the return of the original Destiny's Cosmodrome destination. The site is largely unchanged, but notable because it now houses the best onboarding for new players that the franchise has ever seen. The New Light mission thread echoes the opening steps players first encountered way back in 2014, but with several new twists that confront the challenging task of introducing the many interlocking systems that make up the game.

Bungie continues an admirable trend of introducing seasonal content that gradually evolves the state of the world's story and activities, and these first couple of weeks in Beyond Light prove that effort is ongoing. The arrival of the Crow character is a clever plot twist that reintroduces an old foe in an intriguing new role, and his hunting missions are a good time, with some simple touches that give you the sense that you're stalking a dangerous wounded animal. Meanwhile, the new Deep Stone Crypt raid once again proves Bungie's flexibility and eye for balancing complex encounter design. Equally important, the raid's initial completion also kicked off a whole new loop of missions and story for all players in the game. That sort of reactivity makes the universe dynamic and unpredictable, and I love it.

I respect the hard decisions that were involved in chopping the size of Destiny 2 down and consolidating the focus of play, and the similar moves that were involved in refocusing on gear acquisition rather than letting players continue to endlessly reuse old favorites. But it doesn't change the reality that Destiny 2 feels greatly stripped back at the moment, even with the addition of several new ventures in these early weeks of Beyond Light. As an expansion, Beyond Light introduces some captivating narrative beats and missions, but it's not enough all on its own to carry the load of the Destiny universe. I'm left ambivalent, with plenty of enthusiasm for the new content, and excitement about what comes next, but also the sense that for the first time, my longtime hobby game feels lesser than before. » **Matt Miller**

7.75

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» **Concept**
Rediscover the lost and frozen moon of Europa, and take steps along the dangerous path of wielding new powers of Darkness

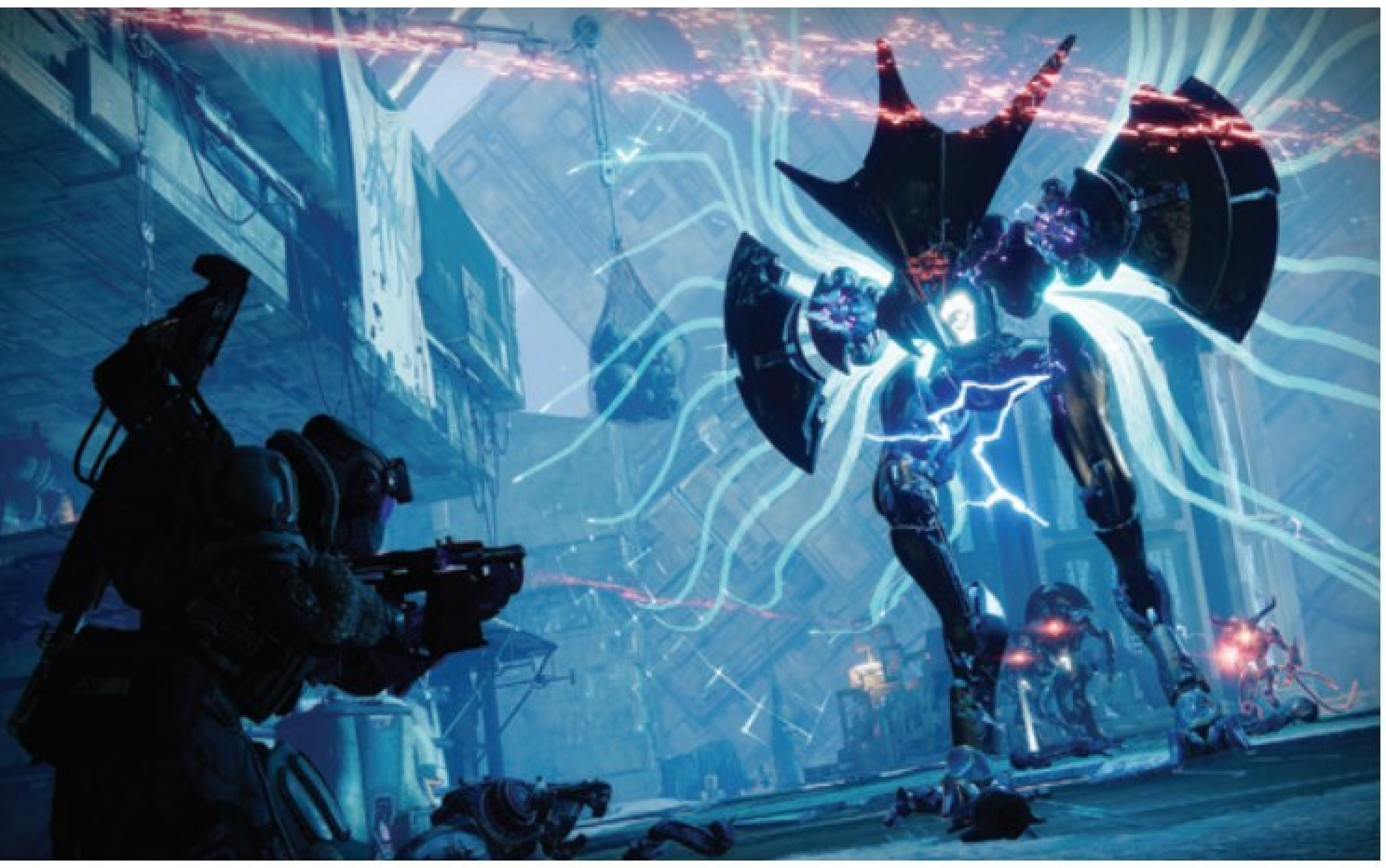
» **Graphics**
The new frozen locale emphasizes massive scale and boundless space, and the new shifting blizzard weather patterns deepen immersion and a sense of place

» **Sound**
New music maintains Destiny's reputation as one of the most compelling soundtracks in gaming, and the voice actors turn in strong performances

» **Playability**
The initial campaign features a difficulty curve ill-suited to casual play. Significant grinding is necessary across this expansion to see the full scope of core missions and new abilities

» **Entertainment**
An engaging story feels like a turning point in the canon, but the game feels diminished after stripping away roughly half of the locations, activities, and other core content

» **Replay Value**
High



Call Of Duty: Black Ops Cold War

Mind games and motorized mayhem

8.75

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Style 1-Player Shooter (40-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Treyarch, Raven Software **Release** November 13 **Rating** M

» Concept
Track down a Soviet spy in the 1980s, engage in vehicle-infused multiplayer carnage, and co-op comradery in zombie modes

» Graphics
A wide variety of entertaining and captivating environments take you through snow-swept valleys and gaudy interiors. It looks good and performs well on next-gen systems, but the visuals aren't breathtaking

» Sound
From big explosions to minor ricochets, the sound effects are on point. A powerful soundtrack keeps the pulse pounding even in the loadout menu

» Playability
Several difficulty modes ensure you can tackle the campaign regardless of your shooter skills. The core gunplay feels smooth and is as solid as ever

» Entertainment
Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War serves up a great campaign, solid multiplayer with fresh spins, and the zany zombie modes that we've come to expect from Treyarch

» Replay Value
High

Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War isn't defined by any one standout mode; like its predecessors, it launches a trifecta of exciting experiences. Head back to the era of Ronald Reagan and the Cold War in a spy-thriller campaign, take on traditional multiplayer with a focus on vehicles, and blast away against the undead in zombie modes. As always, each part of the whole stacks up differently, but the annual Call of Duty release is once again a polished pearl of first-person shooting, even if it doesn't shake up established systems.

The campaign is an enjoyable-but-short return to form for Black Ops. It starts out with a classic Call of Duty guns-blazing soiree, transitions into more of a spy-vs-spy affair, and then goes off the rails with some absolutely wild, reality-warping fare. Taking Call of Duty to these weird places has been hit-and-miss in the past, but this story resonates well as you unearth its mysteries and make choices. While the multiple ending paths you can take won't blow you away, they're a neat little incentive to go back and replay missions another way.

The best missions in the game have a "choose your own adventure" feel to them. One tasks you with playing a double agent through the famous KGB headquarters Lubynaka building, letting you solve some puzzles and come up with solutions as to how to sneak your strike team in. The absolute highlight of the late-game takes place in Vietnam, a mission with a well-designed looping structure that left me grinning and dumbstruck.

While those missions steal the show, even the rank-and-file excursions around the globe pack plenty of punch and creativity. One trip takes you deep behind Soviet lines to discover a training facility where soldiers practice incursions on a quaint simulated USA town – and you can bet that gets rowdy in a hurry. While you can barrel through the critical path in the boisterous campaign in about five hours, you'd be passing up optional missions and plenty of secrets, including old Activision games to play. Of the three core pillars to this Call of Duty title, the campaign stands out as the winner despite its brevity.

The multiplayer suite has plenty of options and modes for players of all types, but it all features the same excellent gunplay and choice that have formed the core of Call of Duty for years.

Fireteams is a 40-person mode with four-person squads, and it features large-scale, team-based firefights similar to Call of Duty's free-to-play battle royale, Warzone. However, Fireteams takes a more focused approach, without the unchecked chaos of Warzone (and without the threat of being booted). If you enjoy working with your friends in big battles and huge maps, this is the perfect opportunity to show off your teamwork. While the mode could be fun with random people, you're going to want to bring three buddies you can talk to on voice chat for the best results – if you queue up and spray-and-pray like a team deathmatch, you're going to get demolished. As a big fan of team-oriented Call of Duty with friends, this mode is an enjoyable change up from the frenetic fury of Warzone.

Finally, there's Zombies. Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War adds some new quirks to the core zombie experience by letting players bring their own loadout into the massive undead slaughterhouses. It feels good to take your honed weapons into the arena instead of relying on what you can find there, but wall-buying guns, powerups, and Juggernog buffs are all still critical parts of the mode. You can also now call a chopper and bail early on the wave-based horde instead of waiting to die, rewarding bonus points. If you've played Zombies before and love it, you'll feel right at home. If you've been waiting for Zombies to do something new to get you onboard, this probably won't do it. Cold War plays it dangerously safe with a mode that was once a revolutionary concept.

If Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War excels at anything, it's options. This isn't uncommon for a Call of Duty title, but with a vast array of game modes for myriad player profiles and a fun campaign that retains a summer-blockbuster feel while getting weird and wild, the ride is a good one.

» Daniel Tack

The DualSense Difference

Not only does the PlayStation 5 controller offer fun chirps, barks, and other sound effects at the appropriate times, but the adaptive triggers provide varying tension, resistance, and feedback as you pop rounds off. Each weapon has been uniquely calibrated to work with the controller.

Demon's Souls

Hello Dark Souls, my old friend

Style 1-Player Action (6-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer Bluepoint Games, SIE Japan Studio **Release** November 12 **Rating** M

In 2009, FromSoftware's Demon's Souls ushered in an age of challenging action/RPGs that are defined by amazing world-building, beautiful environments, epic boss battles, and player choice. During a period when players were being inundated with lengthy tutorials and heavily guided gameplay, Demon's Souls let us explore, discover, and triumph against incredibly dangerous adversaries. Today, Bluepoint Games' remake of FromSoftware's PS3 original shows reverence and adherence to the classic while providing a whole new adventure to those who got into the series later. This new vision of Demon's Souls looks, feels, and runs like a dream.

If you've never played a Souls-like game before, know that the road is hard. The road is tough. The road will chew you up, spit you out, and then stomp on your splintered corpse. Demon's Souls has bosses that are probably easier than FromSoftware's recent projects, but some of the level design can be incredibly unforgiving by comparison. As with modern Souls games, Demon's Souls isn't really about the difficulty; it's about the eventual victory, the besting of the unbeatable, and the knowledge that you can do it.

The PS5-exclusive Demon's Souls is a painstakingly touched-up ode to the original that veterans will be instantly familiar with. From updated and enhanced visuals to some minor quality of life improvements, Bluepoint does well to only make the slightest gameplay changes to an already powerful design. Bluepoint's deft rework allows for updated technology to enhance what was already a great game, but rough around the edges in terms of implementation. The strong gameplay of the original shines bright through it all.

Demon's Souls demands the player be curious, careful, and bold. It's about a wild dodge, a frantic lunge, or the self-control to not fall prey to greed, waiting until just the right moment to go in for that final strike. It's about turning an often-chaotic chord into smooth jazz, reaching deep down into whatever spirit you have left to press on through the deadly dragons, brutal knights, and vile necromancers; to shout into the void (or your living room) that today is not the day you will fall without a fight. The eventual wins are moments you never forget.

Bluepoint's creation takes a few liberties with the source's art direction here and there, but the overall reimagining is vibrant and awesome. The Storm King's bizarre majesty in the pouring rain, the maze-like prisons and spires of Latria, and the depths of the Stonefang Tunnels all shine in brilliant new ways. These are not just levels; they feel like realized worlds. When the lightning bolt hit the tree in Shrine of Storms, I audibly gasped. I felt like I could feel the wind and rain as I took on the Storm King – and that's not even hyperbole. The constant 60 frames-per-second makes a huge difference in terms of responsive, fluid combat compared to the original. Using the Archstone system, you can move from world to world at will, meaning you can take the encounters on in any order you like and explore areas out of your level/gear range if you're feeling spicy, which is a freedom that adds a lot to the game. This isn't a new system, but it's unlike the construction of the Souls games that came after.

For newcomers, Demon's Souls will be the first exploration into the duality of despair and triumph, and hopefully go on to become a starting point for new Souls fans. For veterans, it's a homage to an experiment that kicked off a fantastic genre. Either way, it's wonderful that the nascent ethers from the original classic have coalesced and given us this delightful treat.

» **Daniel Tack**

9.25

PS5

» **Concept**
Create your own playstyle as you journey through challenging dark fantasy lands to restore or doom the world

» **Graphics**
The lush environments and lighting do justice to the source material, bringing a next-gen shine to a classic game

» **Sound**
Immaculate clanking and clashing of steel, eerie cries of manta rays, and the thumping of threats contribute immensely to the immersion

» **Playability**
Demon's Souls demands much of the player in terms of tenacity, patience, and willingness to carry on even when defeat and frustration beckon

» **Entertainment**
At once both a fascinating history lesson for the now ubiquitous Souls-like genre and an enjoyable romp in its own right, this remake gives plenty of reasons to return to the Nexus

» **Replay Value**
High

The DualSense Difference

Adaptive feedback lets you really feel it when you land those big blows on a foe or when your attack is repelled. While this didn't change the core gameplay in any meaningful way for me, it's a nice bonus.

Immortals Fenyx Rising

Divine inspiration

9

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 332

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Quebec **Release** December 4 **Rating** T

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • Stadia • PC

» Concept
A humorous, action-packed adventure in which players explore a massive island brimming with prominent figures and creatures of Greek mythology

» Graphics
The characters may look like strange puppets, but the world they populate is utterly gorgeous

» Sound
An appropriately heroic score accompanies your feats, and the funny narration (by Zeus and Prometheus) hits the mark more than it misses

» Playability
Though some of the environmental puzzles are poorly executed, the challenge-room Vaults are often clever, creative, and fun

» Entertainment
Rewarding exploration, satisfying combat, and imaginative puzzles converge with endearing storytelling and well-executed humor to provide an excellent open-world experience

» Replay Value
Moderate

When a powerful titan defeats the Greek gods and scatters them across the Golden Isle, an unproven shield-bearer named Fenyx washes up on shore. More of a storyteller than a soldier, Fenyx must now write a legend of their own, reuniting the gods and challenging the evil force known as Typhon in an ultimate underdog story. Much like its protagonist, Immortals Fenyx Rising strives to be more than a game that just repeats the glories of others; it adds its own mythical flair on top of developer Ubisoft Quebec's previous work on Assassin's Creed Odyssey. The result is an exciting and unique open-world adventure worthy of a place in the gaming pantheon.

Exploring the Golden Isle is a joyous experience. Rich visuals (inspired by Studio Ghibli's films) create lush and diverse biomes, and your traversal abilities make it simple to navigate the world. Fenyx (who can be male or female) can climb nearly any surface as long as they have the stamina, or jump off a mountain or statue and glide across long distances with ease. Even when I had fast-travel options to reach my destination quicker, I typically opted to make the journey manually. Every corner I turned or nook I explored rewarded me with puzzles to solve or enemies to battle for gear, resources, and other rewards.

As Fenyx progresses, Immortals fulfills a terrific power fantasy. At first, the combat system emphasizes basic attacks, parries, and dodges, but that run-of-the-mill repertoire quickly builds to one that allows you to chain together awesome, godlike powers. You can command your bird companion to rain death from above while you summon a cluster of spears from beneath the ground, then finish the combo with a devastating swing of a giant hammer. Immortals consistently delivers stylish action that encourages you to build your combos and optimize your gear to suit your playstyle. Unfortunately, the enemy types get repetitive; by the end of the journey, I was tired of battling the usual cyclopes and griffins, which is why I actively sought out the unique optional bosses.

When I wanted a tough fight, I took on the corrupted forms of legendary heroes like Achilles and Odysseus, or tracked down Mythical forms of monsters like Medusa or Ozomene. Though you grow rapidly in power as you continue Fenyx's adventure, these optional fights provide distinct, edge-of-your-seat battles that test your skills and strategy – and reward you with unique gear.

Outside of the challenging fights, my favorite tasks to undertake in Immortals are the often-outstanding Vaults of Tartaros. Much like the Shrines in the Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, these large, themed rooms throw distinct puzzles your way, with a different tactic required for each one. I enjoyed the innovative ways Immortals forced me to wrack my brain. One tasked me with activating gusts of wind to blow over obstacles, while another had me figuring out how to move boxes to pressure switches without getting destroyed by lasers. These Vaults feature such careful and intentional design that I always appreciated how clever the solutions were when I finally saw the big picture. Standard Vaults are often short and sweet, but God Vaults, which usually take place at the end of main storylines, are long, involved rooms that can take up to an hour to complete. Not only did I love working through these longer Vaults, but they serve as the perfect way to put a bow on the story arcs featuring some of Greek mythology's most iconic characters, as voice lines play as you progress through the Vault, giving additional insight into the true nature and motivations of that god.

With a narrative that involves a world-reshaping beast alongside the mightiest warriors, gods, and monsters of Greek mythology, you may think Immortals Fenyx Rising takes itself seriously. However, its high stakes and dark premise are punctuated by comedy, providing a lighthearted tone full of endearing moments with many of its characters. While the jokes don't always land, I appreciated the strong mix of sarcasm, self-deprecation, and fourth-wall breaking. While an out-of-nowhere joke has the potential to take you out of the action-packed story, the writing is done in a masterful way that keeps the tone consistent throughout, making neither the serious moments or the comedic ones feel out of place.

Immortals contains all the ingredients I want from an epic, open-world adventure steeped in mythology. With empowering combat, rewarding exploration, and a story that shines a spotlight on its characters through humor, Immortals Fenyx Rising leverages its myriad inspirations to discover its own identity and deliver an outstanding open-world experience. » **Brian Shea**

World Of Warcraft: Shadowlands

Old ghosts and bold beginnings

Style MMORPG **Publisher** Blizzard Entertainment **Developer** Blizzard Entertainment **Release** November 23 **Rating** T

8.75

PC

» **Concept**
Save the world by entering various realms in the afterlife, meeting old friends and enemies along the way

» **Graphics**
Breathtaking and striking environments make it hard to imagine that the game is 16 years old

» **Sound**
The core sounds of World of Warcraft haven't changed much, but there are always unit barks and meme-worthy boss quips to enjoy

» **Playability**
A revamped and customizable levelling process makes Shadowlands a great time for new or returning players to join in

» **Entertainment**
Shadowlands adds some daring elements into the mix while also retaining many of the same hooks that have kept the MMO going over the years

» **Replay Value**
High

Compared to the lifespan of most games, World of Warcraft is ancient - but it's hardly a relic. Even today, Blizzard's MMORPG continues to keep the content flowing for players old and new. Shadowlands is the eighth expansion, and this journey through the afterlife comes with fresh features alongside systems that will be extremely familiar to veterans of the game. At its core, Shadowlands succeeds with powerful world-building fantasy, player identity, and bold gameplay elements.

I aligned myself with the crushed-velvet, soul-sucking, vampiric aristocracy of Revendreth. Its gothic horror trappings, magic mirrors, and giant bats gave me a different perspective on the world than players who sided with other factions. I even got to host VIP parties to try sucking up to nobles to get big payoffs. However, my nature-loving friend sided with the gorgeous ethereal forests of Ardenweald, where they put on plays in the woods and tend gardens. Whatever your decision, it feels more like you're becoming part of these soul societies and not just jumping on an endgame-progression treadmill. There's flavor behind the functionality, and it counts for a lot, even if you are still roaming from zone to zone completing world quests. Each dungeon has elements that can be interacted with from a faction standpoint as well; discovering I could tame the gargoyles in a Venthyr dungeon to help defeat enemies was a nice surprise.

The Maw is an incredibly hazardous realm that offers risk-reward balance as you hang out in the Jailer's backyard, battling lethal monsters without any real safety net to speak of. You may even have to run back to where you died to recover some lost resources. The Maw adds some pressure and challenge to an open-zone environment, which is absolutely refreshing in a game in which it's all too easy to end up on autopilot world quest mode while watching Netflix. Participating in Maw activities raises the ire of the Jailer, who focuses on you like the Eye of Sauron in Mordor as you slay his fiends. While it's functionally just another way to gate how much you can do in The Maw every day, it's again the colorful packaging that makes the difference here.

The pinnacle of Shadowlands content is Torghast. Take the variance and unpredictability of roguelike runs and do them on your WoW character, alone or with friends, in a damned dungeon tower that's different every time. After doing a decade of dungeon runs that never change, Torghast is a beyond welcome addition. Even the greatest curated dungeons lose their luster after completing them a dozen times, so the prospect of something new each dive is tantalizing. Each run is another opportunity to try out different builds and strategies as your powerups and situations change constantly. One run may turn you into an overpowered god stacking multiple scaling sources of damage to annihilate everything in sight or accumulating enough regeneration to handle anything. Complete puzzles to open caches, rescue some companions you can take back to your hideout, run into a mimic, or slay a rare mini-boss that confers special powers. The Torghast climb is great fun and quite replayable – I found myself going back in even after I had capped my rewards for the week just to explore, experiment, and enjoy.

It's worth mentioning that the new leveling experience that rolled out with Shadowlands is excellent, allowing you to get a character leveled, geared, and into the new content in a fraction of the time it would have taken before, so you have time to learn your class easily before hitting the Shadowlands. This allows players to level up through any of WoW's old expansions at a rapid pace, tempting adventurers to enjoy the old content whilst keeping it relevant in a new era. I leveled several characters for fun just to explore the old expansions, and it felt great to have a few more options in my stable to explore Shadowlands with.

Shadowlands plays it safe with numerous takes on established systems and structures, but lets players enjoy those features with a plethora of personality via the covenant factions and themed zones. But the expansion also also takes chances with a deadly zone that promotes teamwork and careful play alongside a fantastic roguelike run tower that's full of surprises. Shadowlands is a satisfying addition to the annals of World of Warcraft expansions, and with a robust and revamped leveling experience rolling out with it, it's a great time to come back to the MMORPG that made the genre mainstream. » **Daniel Tack**

AFTERLIFE
HOMICIDE
CALAVERA PATRONS

Cyberpunk 2077

A wild time in Night City

9

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** CD Projekt **Developer** CD Projekt Red **Release** December 10 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Stadia

» Concept
A deep RPG experience that struggles with gunplay and glitches, but excels with its world, characters, and wealth of loot

» Graphics
The level of detail is staggering. Every street corner and interior is worth examining. However, visual glitches occur frequently in the animations and environments

» Sound
The electronic and synth-heavy score is fantastic. The radio stations also have a unique mix of songs that fit Night City's vibe. Keanu Reeves is every bit as good as you would hope he is, and helps overcome some of the protagonist's cringey banter

» Playability
Cybernetic upgrades make stealth incredibly fun, but problematic enemy A.I. steals the fun out of the gunplay

» Entertainment
An open world you can get lost in and continue finding new things to do

» Replay Value
High

Cyberpunk 2077 is a work of awe-inspiring ambition, dazzling with its massive scale and creative vision. The world of Night City is a metropolis of futuristic art, stealing your eye with stunning neon-lit architecture and streets filled with citizens made of flesh and metal. Night City is an open world that immediately pulls you in and keeps you engaged with its dark narrative, meaningful player choice, and overwhelming amount of side content.

Your lens into this tech-obsessed society is the protagonist simply named V, a cyberpunk you fully design, including their voice, backstory (which subtly alters the narrative), and even genitals. I spent far too much time creating my look, even though I rarely saw it during play due to the mostly first-person perspective. V is fun to control thanks to immense amounts of cybertech, but is an unlikable lead, spouting off profanity and groan-inducing one-liners, and generally displaying a "scum of the earth" personality.

V, while making a mess of conversations, has an interesting story to tell. It goes places I didn't expect and gets wild toward the end. The narrative hits its stride when V meets Johnny Silverhand, a former terrorist who is now a digital construct that lives in V's mind. Silverhand's thoughts and dark ambitions are twisted and dangerous, leading to great conversational choices and decisions that allow players to shape the story and action. The biggest allure of Silverhand is how he's brought to life by actor Keanu Reeves, who looks and sounds as awesome in the role as he does in any film on the silver screen. Given how wonderful some of the other characters are (with their own long and fantastic arcs), Reeves doesn't steal the show – but Silverhand is a constant throughout most of the game and helps save V from being too overbearing.

Silverhand will bring a smile to your face, but Cyberpunk 2077 doesn't have many joyous bones in its body, and is often heavy in the delivery of its dark content. Night City may be vibrant, but it's home mostly to evil people doing terrible things. Some of the content made me uncomfortable, including story moments dealing with abuse and sexual assault. Even the average bystanders sometimes gave me pause, such as a drugged woman being held in place by a man, a setup seen all over the city. Developers should be free to explore all subject matter, but it sometimes feels careless in Cyberpunk 2077 – more like edgy set-dressing than meaningful commentary.

Much like V's inability to think clearly with Silverhand clouding the mind, Cyberpunk 2077's story often has different tones, and is all over the place from mission to mission. In one side story, V may come across as likable and mature. In the next, V suddenly sounds like an angsty teenager again (the tone you hear most). It's hit or miss, but most quests deliver awesome moments, particularly when new NPCs are introduced. Almost every

mission-giver or notable character is vividly brought to life in voice, animation, and by the crazy amounts of detail on their body. The same can be said for many of the locations they inhabit; an outstanding level of detail in the world makes each unique area a sight to behold. I can't stress this enough; exploring Night City is a huge hook that CD Projekt Red knocks out of the park.

Some of the more memorable characters and story arcs are tucked off to the side, and you may never see them if you don't veer off of the critical path (which can be completed in roughly 15 to 20 hours). I don't know how many dozens (or hundreds) of hours of side content are around it, but the mission log just keeps growing as you play. While the main story sequences often end with cliffhangers that demand resolution and the thought that you should continue on that path, the best way to experience Cyberpunk 2077 is to see what the city has to offer. Walk into a crowded market, explore a mysterious question mark on your map, and take on the side missions that the denizens are offering – just surrender yourself to moment-to-moment discovery.

CD Projekt Red wants you to soak in the beauty of the world, but also demands you spend plenty of time in menus assigning new abilities, crafting, and sorting through heaps of loot. That isn't a knock against the game. It's all handled quite well. Any room you enter could have numerous items to pick up, as well as world-building text you can read. The amount of leveling you can do is immense, which is reflected on sprawling ability charts that take considerable amounts of time to fill out. If you only focus on the critical path, you barely scratch the surface of the abilities, which carry significant advantages to combat, stealth, hacking, and dialogue. It's amazing how much you can improve and expand upon V's standard attributes. I also love how doing various things helps improve V in those fields.

Using cyberware and abilities to mess with enemies is good fun, such as cooking a grenade in an enemy's pocket. Hacking cameras and activating devices from afar to distract foes makes stealth satisfying. I enjoyed creeping through environments, hacking the cameras and turrets as I went. I leaned more on stealth than expected, partially because I didn't find the gunplay enthralling. The weapons you obtain feel awesome (and give good reason to track down the legendary and iconic versions), but the enemy A.I. isn't great, leading to headshots being delivered like they are going out of style. Some enemies think they are hidden behind thin railings, others charge foolishly toward you and then stop without any cover around them. Harder missions (which are nicely indicated on the log) are a little more intense given the spike in difficulty, but the adversaries are still easy to manipulate, unless they are an aggressive boss or cyber ninja that crowds you quickly.

Johnny Silverhand sadly isn't the only glitch in Cyberpunk 2077. Not since The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim have I played a game that is riddled with so many graphical bugs at launch. The danger of entering a seedy bar loses its bite when one of its patrons stands motionless in a T-pose. A high-speed motorcycle chase down a highway is far less intense than it should be when an NPC biker shakes so much he looks like a blur. Little visual hitches in the environment and characters occur frequently, and they're jarring, but I rarely ran into anything that affected gameplay. The only major issues I experienced were I could no longer look down the sight of my guns during one mission – reloading my save fixed the issue. I also had a digitized visual effect remain after a cutscene. Again, I had to reload and replay a sequence to get the proper outcome. Regardless, the frequency of the odd visual moments hurts immersion, and can outright ruin a suspenseful moment.

Cyberpunk 2077 is dark and disturbing at times (frighteningly so), but the majority of its content is fascinating, and loaded with depth through the various RPG systems and lore. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Night City, and Johnny Silverhand is a great partner to see the sights with. Cyberpunk 2077 doesn't overstay its welcome with its critical-path story, and invites players to jack in and stay for hundreds of hours of unique content should they want to. It didn't blow me away like The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, but is still a hell of an opening to what will hopefully be a new series. » **Andrew Reiner**

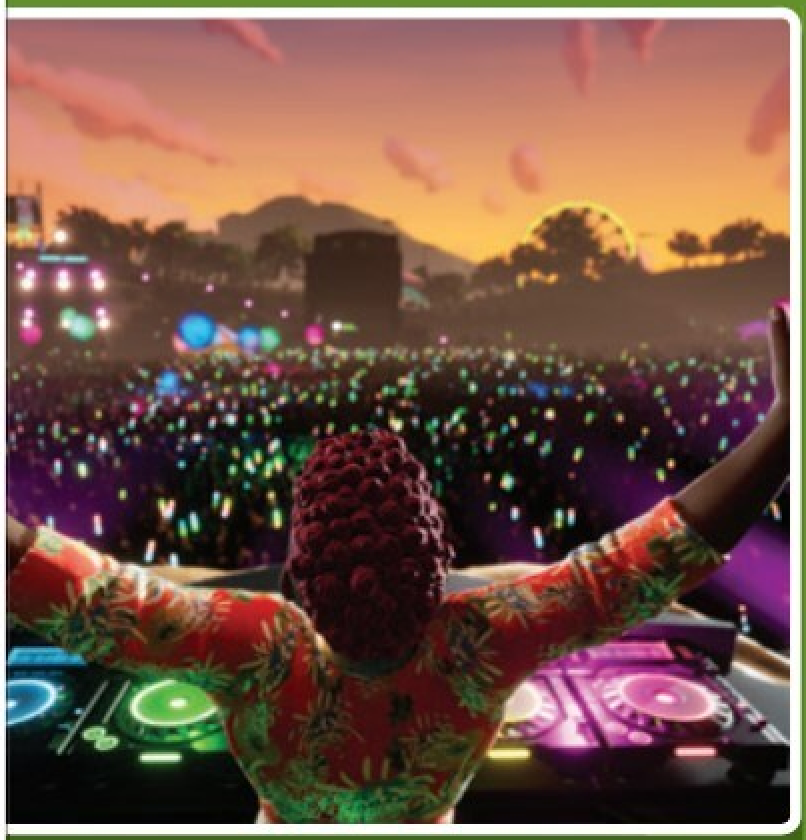
The PC Difference

As of this writing, the best way to experience Cyberpunk 2077 is on a high-end gaming PC. That's how I played for this review, but I also saw how the game performs on various PlayStation and Xbox machines. The visuals and performance take a significant hit on the base PlayStation 4 and Xbox One systems, sometimes looking downright ugly in larger spaces occupied by numerous characters. Even the more powerful PlayStation 4 Pro and Xbox One X struggle with the content (though they run a little better). If you absolutely have to play it on a console, the Xbox Series X/S and PlayStation 5 are the way to go, but it should be noted that they are running the PS4 and Xbox One versions via backwards compatibility. While you see better framerates and resolutions on the new-gen hardware, the performance is still a far cry from PC. CD Projekt Red has said it will release a free next-gen upgrade that truly takes advantage of the power of these machines at some point in 2021.

8.75 Fuser

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release November 10 **Rating** T

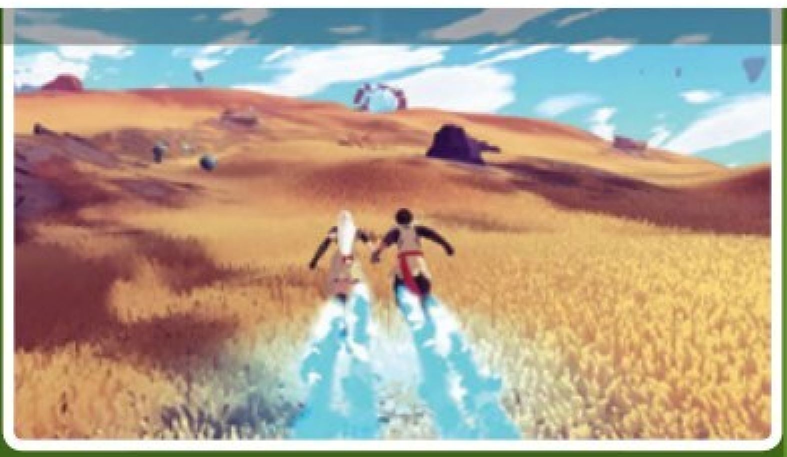
Fuser allows you to aptly fulfill the DJ fantasy better than ever before, without the need for clunky peripherals you'll only use for one game. Though I poured hours into the experience, I still feel like I have so many corners and interactions to explore within the library of available tracks. **– Brian Shea**



7.5 Haven

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
Release December 10 **Rating** M

A low-impact fusion of visual novel and RPG, but it fails to fully harness the best of both worlds. Even so, Haven gets the fundamental elements right. **– Joe Juba**



8 Kingdom Hearts: Melody Of Memory

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch **Release** November 13 **Rating** E10+

As a fan of the series, I've always praised the score, but something about actually going back through various tracks and tapping to the beats on familiar backdrops showcased just how powerful these songs have been. **– Kimberley Wallace**

8 Sackboy: A Big Adventure

Platform PS5 • PS4 **Release** November 12 **Rating** E

Sackboy: A Big Adventure is a wonderful platformer that takes what's come before, sprinkles in its trademark aesthetic, and shakes things up enough to feel fresh and exciting. **– Jeff Cork**

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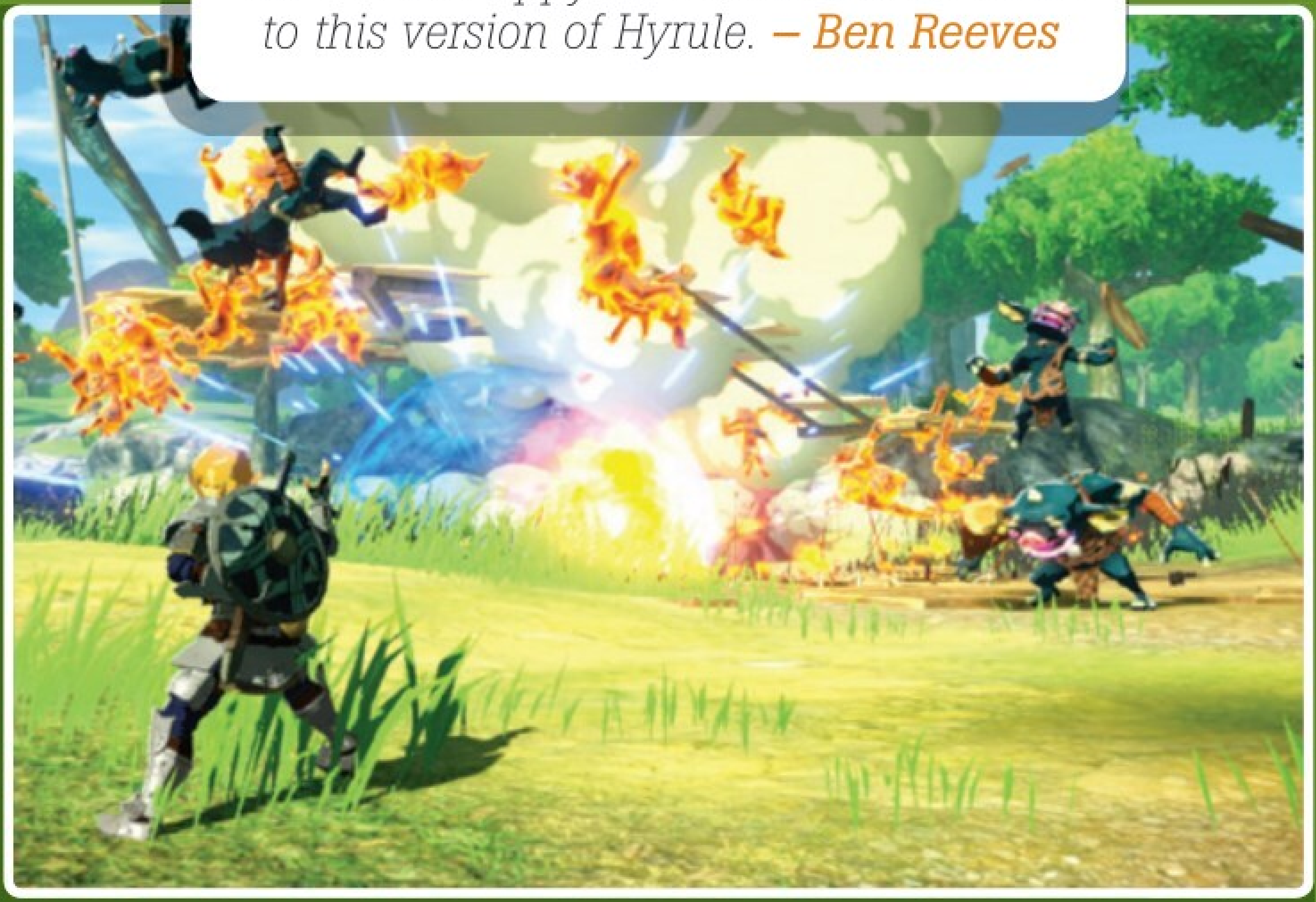
7.5 Hyrule Warriors: Age Of Calamity

Platform Switch **Release** November 20 **Rating** T

Age of Calamity may not resemble a traditional Zelda game, but it's not a bad time. The action is repetitive, but also relaxed and comfortable. It trades on your love for Nintendo's classic franchise, and I was happy for the excuse to return to this version of Hyrule. – Ben Reeves



8 NBA 2K21

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
Release November 10 (Xbox Series X/S), November 12 (PS5) **Rating** E

NBA 2K21's full-team on-court action plays the best it ever has, and the graphical leap is impressive to boot, but it still comes up short in some key areas. Visual Concepts still hasn't figured out a great way to elevate its online play, and microtransactions continue to destroy what should be a fun part of the experience.
– Kimberley Wallace

8 Carto

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** October 27 **Rating** E

You embark on a globetrotting adventure to fill in pieces of your magical map while also chasing your equally adventurous grandmother. The journey gets tough at times, but ingenious puzzle-solving awaits those willing to embark on the voyage. – Marcus Stewart

Our next issue launches digitally on 2/02
with the print issue to follow

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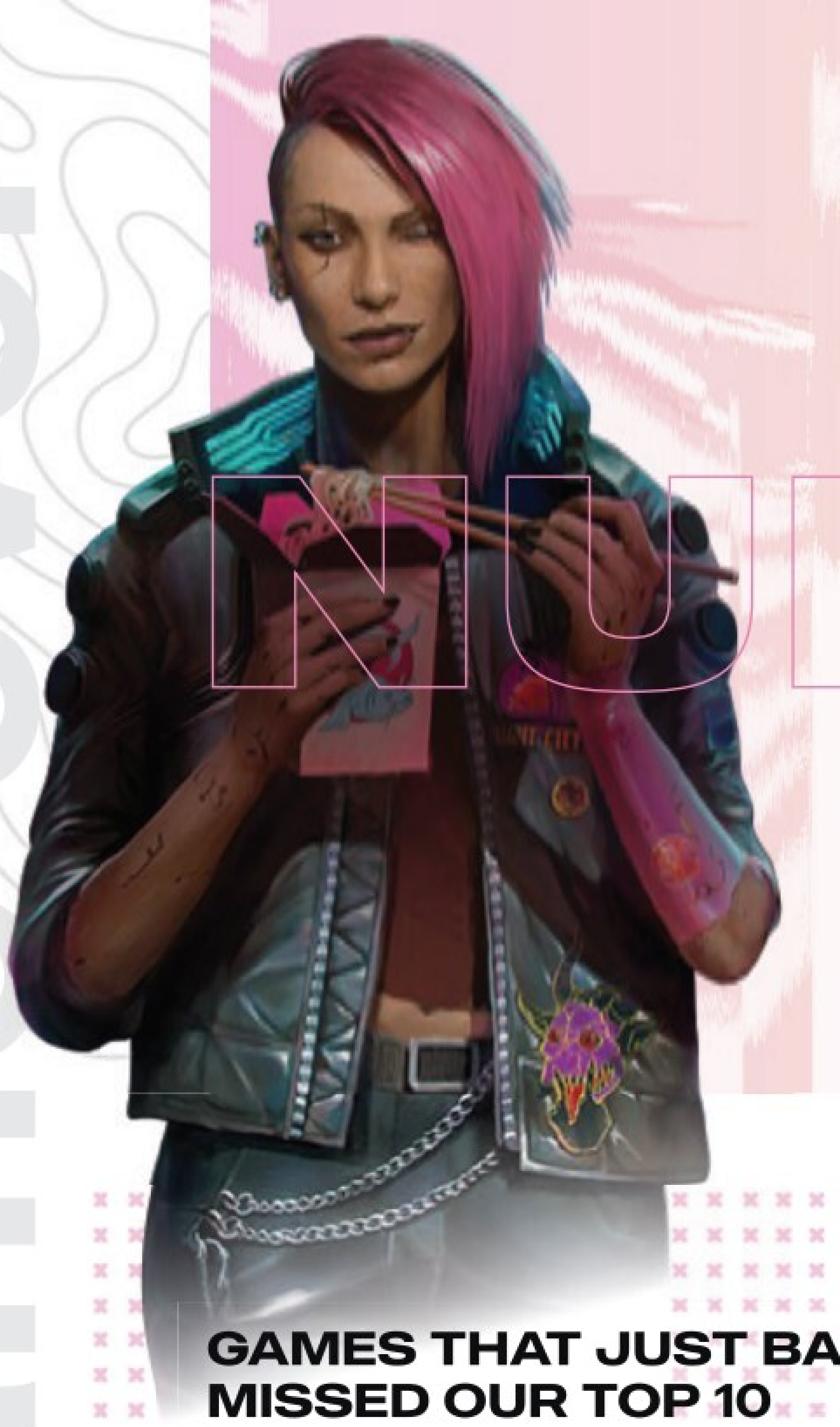


END OF THE YEAR NUMBERS

After hours of deliberation, bitter fights, and only a few casualties, we've finally determined our favorite games of 2020. To wrap things up, we're breaking down our top 10 games by the numbers. From how many hours you could spend playing all our favorite games of the year to the scores we gave them, here are our end-of-the-year stats.

by Blake Hester

GAMES THAT JUST BARELY MISSED OUR TOP 10

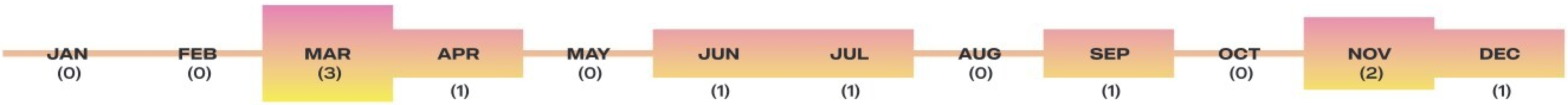
Demon's Souls
Cyberpunk 2077

OVERALL MOST AWARDS

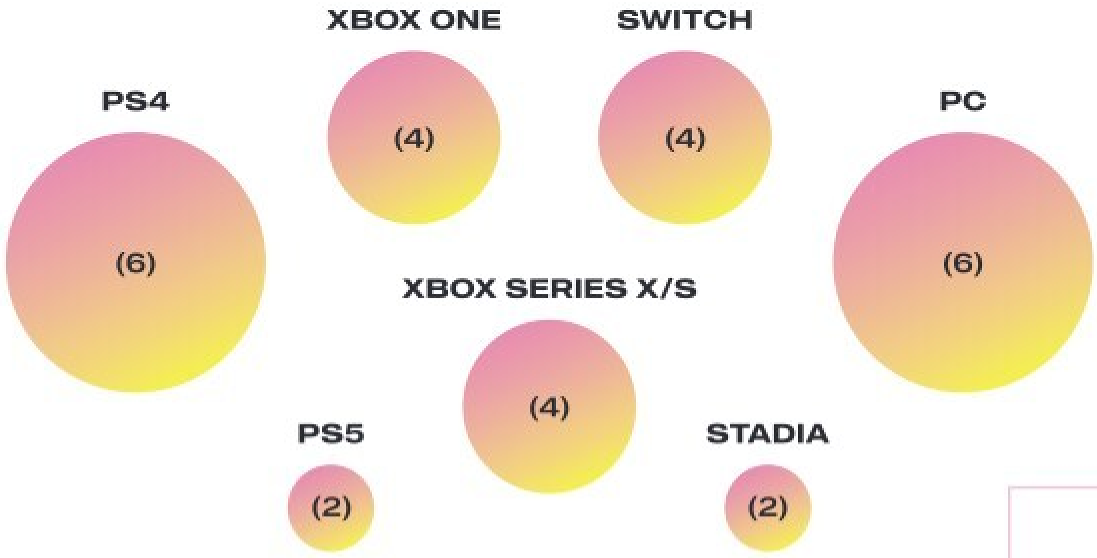
The Last of Us Part II

0 NEXT-GEN ONLY GAMES

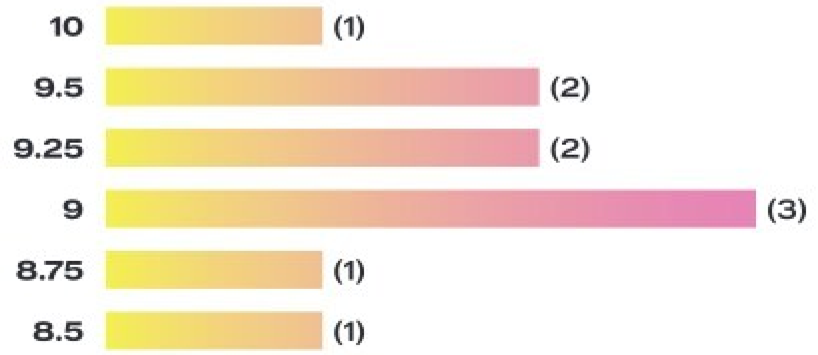
OUR TOP 10 BY MONTH RELEASED



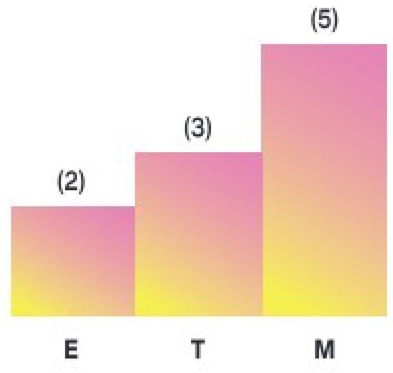
OUR TOP 10 BY PLATFORM



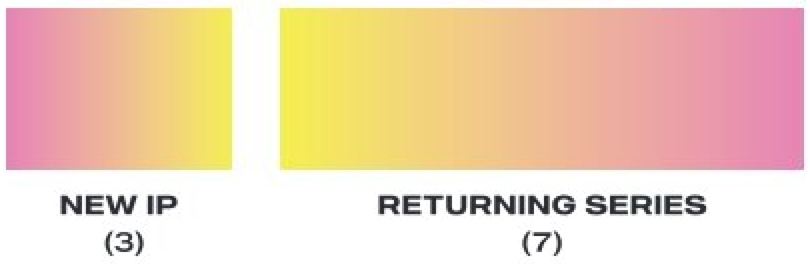
OUR TOP 10 BY SCORE



OUR TOP 10 BY ESRB



NEW IP VERSUS RETURNING SERIES

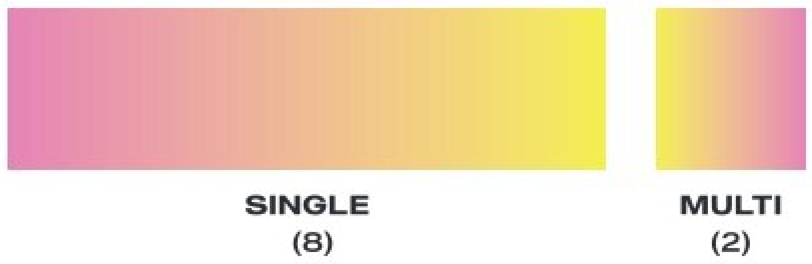


HOW MANY HOURS COULD YOU SPEND PLAYING OUR TOP 10?

310.5 hrs

(Data aggregated from HowLongToBeat.com and our personal playtimes)

SINGLE PLAYER VERSUS GAMES WITH MULTIPLAYER COMPONENTS



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